

*Finding
Faith*

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Table of Contents

Forward		3
Chapter 1	Abraham's faith was tested	4
Chapter 2	Faith is affected by relationships	10
Chapter 3	Your life must share faith's evidence	17
Chapter 4	Faith does not guarantee prosperity	22
Chapter 5	Disciples not always strong in faith	30
Chapter 6	Believers can share their faith	36
Chapter 7	Ways people lose faith	46
Chapter 8	Not admitting your faith	53
Chapter 9	How much faith do you need?	62

Forward

Hebrews 11:1-9

What is faith? It is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see. God gave his approval to people in days of old because of their faith.

By faith we understand that the entire universe was formed at God's command, that what we now see did not come from anything that can be seen.

It was by faith that Abel brought a more acceptable offering to God than Cain did. God accepted Abel's offering to show that he was a righteous man. And although Abel is long dead, he still speaks to us because of his faith.

It was by faith that Enoch was taken up to heaven without dying "Suddenly he disappeared because God took him." But before he was taken up, he was approved as pleasing to God.

So, you see, it is impossible to please God without faith.

May you be blessed and your faith increased as you study the promises and instruction given through the Word of God.

Chapter 1



Abraham's faith was tested by difficulties.

At that time there was a severe famine in the land, so Abram went down to Egypt to wait it out. Genesis 12:10

When famine struck, Abram went to Egypt where there was food. Why would there be a famine in the land where God had just called Abram?

This was a test of Abram's faith, and Abram passed. He didn't question God's leading when facing this difficulty. Many believers find that when they determine to follow God, they immediately encounter great obstacles.

The next time you face such a test, don't try to second-guess what God is doing. Use the intelligence God gave you, as Abram did when he temporarily moved to Egypt, and wait for new opportunities.

Faith made Abraham right with God.

And Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord declared him righteous because of his faith. Genesis 15:6

Although Abram had been demonstrating his faith through his actions, it was his belief in the Lord, not his actions that made Abram right with God (Romans 4:1-5). We too can have a right relationship with God by trusting him.

Our outward actions—church attendance, prayer, good deeds—will not by themselves make us right with God. A right relationship is based on faith—the heartfelt inner confidence that God is who he says he is and does what he says he will do.

Right actions will follow naturally as by-products.

Faith grows with exercise.

"Soon I will die," Joseph told his brothers, "but God will surely come for you, to lead you out of this land of Egypt. He will bring you back to the land he vowed to give to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Genesis 50:24

Joseph was ready to die. He had no doubts that God would keep his promise and one day bring the Israelites back to their homeland.

What a tremendous example! The secret of that kind of faith is a lifetime of trusting God. Your faith is like a muscle—it grows with exercise, gaining strength over time. After a lifetime of exercising trust, your faith can be as strong as Joseph's.

Then at your death, you can be confident that God will fulfill all his promises to you and to all those faithful to him who may live after you.

This verse sets the stage for what would begin to happen in Exodus and come to completion in Joshua. God was going to make Jacob's family into a great nation, lead them out of Egypt, and bring them into the land he had promised them.

The nation would rely heavily on this promise, and Joseph emphasized his belief that God would do what he had promised.

Complaining can show lack of faith.

Then they turned against Moses and complained, "Why did you bring us out here to die in the wilderness? Weren't there enough graves for us in Egypt?"

Why did you make us leave? Didn't we tell you to leave us alone while we were still in Egypt? Our Egyptian slavery was far better than dying out here in the wilderness!" Exodus 14:11-12

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Lack of faith brings troubles.

The people blamed Moses and said, "We wish we had died in the Lord's presence with our brothers!

Did you bring the Lord's people into this wilderness to die, along with all our livestock?

Why did you make us leave Egypt and bring us here to this terrible place? This land has no grain, figs, grapes, or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!" Numbers 20:3-5

After 37 years in the desert, the Israelites forgot that their wanderings were a result of their parents' and their own sin. They could not accept the fact that they brought their problems upon themselves, so they blamed Moses for their condition.

Often our troubles result from our own disobedience or lack of faith. We cannot blame God for our sins. Until we face this reality, we will have little peace and no spiritual growth.

Faith is following God despite the difficulties.

"But you responded, 'First, let's send out scouts to explore the land for us. They will advise us on the best route to take and decide which towns we should capture.' Deut. 1:22

The spies were sent into the land to determine not *whether* they should enter, but *where* they should enter.

Upon returning, however, most of the spies concluded that the land was not worth the obstacles. God would give the Israelites the power to conquer the land, but they were afraid of the risk and decided not to enter.

God gives us the power to overcome our obstacles, but like the Israelites filled with fear and skepticism, we often let difficulties control our lives. Following God regardless of the difficulties is the way to have courageous, overcoming faith.

Faith involves endurance to the end.

A delegation from the tribe of Judah, led by Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite, came to Joshua at Gilgal. Caleb said to Joshua, "Remember what the Lord said to Moses, the man of God, about you and me when we were at Kadesh-barnea.

I was forty years old when Moses, the servant of the Lord, sent me from Kadesh-barnea to explore the land of Canaan.

I returned and gave from my heart a good report, but my brothers who went with me frightened the people and discouraged them from entering the Promised Land.

For my part, I followed the Lord my God completely. So that day Moses promised me, 'The land of Canaan on which you were just

walking will be your special possession and that of your descendants forever, because you wholeheartedly followed the Lord my God.'

"Now, as you can see, the Lord has kept me alive and well as he promised for all these forty-five years since Moses made this promise—even while Israel wandered in the wilderness. Today I am eighty-five years old.

I am as strong now as I was when Moses sent me on that journey, and I can still travel and fight as well as I could then.

So I'm asking you to give me the hill country that the Lord promised me. You will remember that as scouts we found the Anakites living there in great, walled cities.

But if the Lord is with me, I will drive them out of the land, just as the Lord said." Joshua 14:6-12

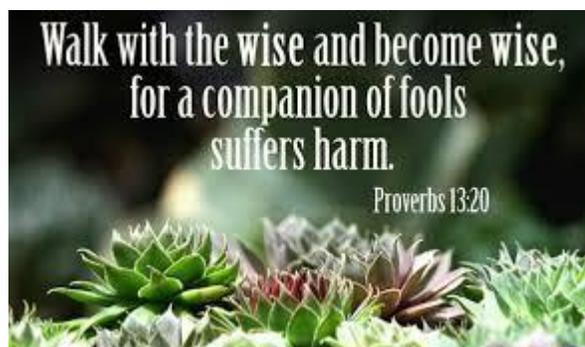
Caleb was faithful from the start. As one of the original spies sent into the Promised Land (Numbers 13:30-33).

He saw great cities and giants, yet he knew God would help the people conquer the land. Because of his faith, God promised him a personal inheritance of land (Numbers 14:24; Deut. 1:34-36).

Here, 45 years later, the land was given to him. His faith was still unwavering. Although his inherited land still had giants, Caleb knew the Lord would help him conquer them.

Like Caleb, we must be faithful to God, not only at the start of our walk with him, but through our entire lives. We must never allow ourselves to rest on our past accomplishments or reputations.

Chapter 2



Faith is affected by relationships.

So Israel lived among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, and they intermarried with them. Israelite sons married their daughters, and Israelite daughters were given in marriage to their sons. And the Israelites worshiped their gods.

The Israelites did what was evil in the Lord's sight. They forgot about the Lord their God, and they worshiped the images of Baal and the Asherah poles. Judges 3:5-7

The Israelites discovered that relationships affect faith. The men and women of the surrounding nations were attractive to the Israelites.

Soon they intermarried, and the Israelites accepted their pagan gods. This was clearly prohibited by God (Exodus 34:15-17; Deut. 7:1-4).

By accepting these gods into their homes, the Israelites gradually began to accept the immoral practices associated with them.

Most Israelites didn't start out determined to be idolaters; they just added the idols to the worship of God. But before long they found themselves absorbed in pagan worship.

A similar danger faces us. We want to befriend those who don't know God, but through those friendships we can become entangled in unhealthy practices.

Friendships with unbelievers are important, but we must accept people without compromising or adopting their patterns of behavior.

How well does yours faith take pressure?

That night the Lord said to Gideon, "Take the second best bull from your father's herd, the one that is seven years old. Pull down your father's altar to Baal, and cut down the Asherah pole standing beside it.

Then build an altar to the Lord your God here on this hill, laying the stones carefully. Sacrifice the bull as a burnt offering on the altar, using as fuel the wood of the Asherah pole you cut down."

So Gideon took ten of his servants and did as the Lord had commanded.

But he did it at night because he was afraid of the other members of his father's household and the people of the town. He knew what would happen if they found out who had done it.

Early the next morning, as the people of the town began to stir, someone discovered that the altar of Baal had been knocked down and that the Asherah pole beside it was gone.

In their place a new altar had been built, and it had the remains of a sacrifice on it. The people said to each other, "Who did this?" And after asking around and making a careful search, they learned that it was Gideon, the son of Joash.

"Bring out your son," they shouted to Joash. "He must die for destroying the altar of Baal and for cutting down the Asherah pole." Judges 6:25-30

After God called Gideon to be Israel's deliverer, he immediately asked him to tear down the altar of the pagan god, Baal—an act that would test Gideon's faith and commitment.

Canaanite religion was very political, so an attack on a god was often seen as an attack on the local government supporting that god. If caught, Gideon would face serious social problems and probable physical attack.

Gideon took a great risk by following God's higher law, which specifically forbids idol worship (Exodus 20:1-5).

After learning what Gideon had done, the townspeople wanted to kill him. Many of those people were fellow Israelites. This shows how immoral God's people had become.

God said in Deut. 13:6-11 that idolaters must be stoned to death, but these Israelites wanted to stone Gideon for tearing down an idol and worshiping God!

When you begin to accomplish something for God, the very people who should support you may criticize you.

Faith is the criteria by which God works through people

So now the Lord called a third time, and once more Samuel jumped up and ran to Eli. "Here I am," he said. "What do you need?"

Then Eli realized it was the Lord who was calling the boy. [9] So he said to Samuel, "Go and lie down again, and if someone calls again, say, 'Yes, Lord, your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went back to bed. 1 Samuel 3:8-9

One would naturally expect an audible message from God to be given to the priest Eli and not to the child Samuel. Eli was older and more experienced, and he held the proper position. But God's chain of command is based on faith, not on age or position. In finding faithful followers, God may use unexpected channels. Be prepared for the Lord to work at any place, at any time, and through anyone he chooses.

God's provision is as large as your faith.

Soon every container was full to the brim!

"Bring me another jar," she said to one of her sons.

"There aren't any more!" he told her. And then the olive oil stopped flowing. 2 Kings 4:6

The woman and her sons collected jars from their neighbors, pouring oil into them from their one pot. The oil was probably olive oil and was used for cooking, for lamps, and for fuel.

The oil stopped pouring only when they ran out of containers. The number of jars they gathered was an indication of their faith. God's provision was as large as their faith and willingness to obey.

Faith opens the door to new resources.

"Don't be afraid!" Elisha told him. "For there are more on our side than on theirs!" Then Elisha prayed, "O Lord, open his eyes and let him see!"

The Lord opened his servant's eyes, and when he looked up, he saw that the hillside around Elisha was filled with horses and chariots of fire. 2 Kings 6:16-17

Elisha's servant was no longer afraid when he saw God's mighty heavenly army. Faith reveals that God is doing more for his people than we can ever realize through sight alone.

When you face difficulties that seem insurmountable, remember that spiritual resources are there even if you can't see them. Look through the eyes of faith and let God show you his resources. If you don't see God working in your life, the problem may be your spiritual eyesight, not God's power.

Faith believes in the impossible

Elisha replied, "Hear this message from the Lord! This is what the Lord says: By this time tomorrow in the markets of Samaria, five quarts of fine flour will cost only half an ounce of silver, and ten quarts of barley grain will cost only half an ounce of silver."

The officer assisting the king said to the man of God, "That couldn't happen even if the Lord opened the windows of heaven!" But Elisha replied, "You will see it happen, but you won't be able to eat any of it!" 2 Kings 7:1-2

When Elisha prophesied God's deliverance, the king's officer said it couldn't happen. The officer's faith and hope were gone, but God's words came true anyway (2 Kings 7:14-16)!

Sometimes we become preoccupied with problems when we should be looking for opportunities. Instead of focusing on the negatives, develop an attitude of expectancy.

To say that God *cannot* rescue someone or that a situation is *impossible* demonstrates a lack of faith.

**Don't get so preoccupied with your faith
That you fail to share it**

Now there were four men with leprosy sitting at the entrance of the city gates. "Why should we sit here waiting to die?" they asked each other.

"We will starve if we stay here, and we will starve if we go back into the city. So we might as well go out and surrender to the Aramean army. If they let us live, so much the better. But if they kill us, we would have died anyway."

So that evening they went out to the camp of the Arameans, but no one was there! For the Lord had caused the whole army of Aram to hear the clatter of speeding chariots and the galloping of horses and the sounds of a great army approaching. "The king of Israel has hired the Hittites and Egyptians to attack us!" they cried out.

So they panicked and fled into the night, abandoning their tents, horses, donkeys, and everything else, and they fled for their lives.

When the lepers arrived at the edge of the camp, they went into one tent after another, eating, drinking wine, and carrying out silver and gold and clothing and hiding it.

Finally, they said to each other, "This is not right. This is wonderful news, and we aren't sharing it with anyone! If we wait until morning, some terrible calamity will certainly fall upon us. Come on, let's go back and tell the people at the palace."

So they went back to the city and told the gatekeepers what had happened—that they had gone out to the Aramean camp and no one was there! The horses and donkeys were tethered and the tents were all in order, but there was not a single person around. 2 Kings 7:3-10

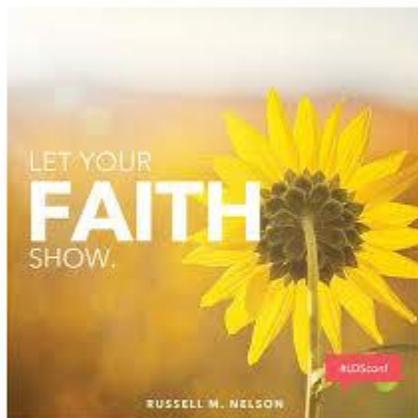
According to the law, lepers were not allowed in the city, but were to depend on charity outside the gate (Leviticus 13:45-46; Numbers 5:1-4). Because of the famine and the presence of the Aramean army, their situation was desperate.

The lepers discovered the deserted camp and realized their lives had been spared. At first they kept the good news to themselves, forgetting their fellow citizens who were starving in the city.

The Good News about Jesus Christ must be shared too, for no news is more important. We must not forget those who are dying without it.

We must not become so preoccupied with our own faith that we neglect sharing it with those around us. Our "good news," like that of the lepers, will not "wait until daylight."

Chapter 3



Your life must show evidence of faith.

Then Jehoahaz prayed for the Lord's help, and the Lord heard his prayer. The Lord could see how terribly the king of Aram was oppressing Israel.

So the Lord raised up a deliverer to rescue the Israelites from the tyranny of the Arameans. Then Israel lived in safety again as they had in former days.

But they continued to sin, following the evil example of Jeroboam. They even set up an Asherah pole in Samaria. 2 Kings 13:4-6

The Lord heard Jehoahaz's prayer for help. God delayed his judgment on Israel when they turned to him for help, but they did not sustain their dependence on God for long.

Although there were periodic breaks in their idol worship, there was rarely evidence of genuine faith.

It is not enough to say no to sin; we must also say yes to a life of commitment to God. An occasional call for help is not a substitute for a daily life of trust in God.

Aram, which lay to the north of Israel, was always Israel's enemy.

This was partly because Israel blocked most of Aram's trade from the south, and Aram cut off most of Israel's from the north. If one nation could conquer the other, all its trade routes would be open and its economy would flourish.

God can rekindle the smallest amount of faith.

For a remnant of my people will spread out from Jerusalem, a group of survivors from Mount Zion. The passion of the Lord Almighty will make this happen! 2 Kings 19:31

As long as a tiny spark remains, a fire can be rekindled and fanned into a roaring blaze. Similarly, if just the smallest remnant of true believers retains the spark of faith, God can rebuild it into a strong nation. And if only a glimmer of faith remains in a heart, God can use it to restore blazing faith in that believer. If you feel that only a spark of faith remains in you, ask God to use it to rekindle a blazing fire of commitment to him.

The Faith of Esther

"Go and gather together all the Jews of Susa and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will do the same. And then, though it is against the law, I will go in to see the king. If I must die, I am willing to die." Esther 4:16

By calling for a fast, Esther was asking the Jews to pray for God's help on her dangerous mission. In the Old Testament, prayer always accompanies fasting. An important function of a

community of believers is mutual support in difficult times. When you are experiencing struggles, turn to fellow believers for support by sharing your trials with them and gaining strength from the bond that unites you. Ask them to pray for you. And when others need your support, give it willingly.

Not knowing all the answers develops faith.

There was a man named Job who lived in the land of Uz. He was blameless, a man of complete integrity. He feared God and stayed away from evil. Job 1:1

As we read the book of Job, we have information that the characters of the story do not. Job, the main character of the book, lost all he had through no fault of his own. As he struggled to understand why all this was happening to him, it became clear that he was not meant to know the reasons. He would have to face life with the answers and explanations held back. Only then would his faith fully develop.

We must experience life as Job did—one day at a time and without complete answers to all of life's questions. Will we, like Job, trust God no matter what? Or will we give in to the temptation to say that God doesn't really care?

Adversity destroys counterfeit faith.

Satan replied to the Lord, "Yes, Job fears God, but not without good reason! Job 1:9

From this conversation, we learn a great deal about Satan. (1) He is accountable to God.

All angelic beings, good and evil, are compelled to present themselves before God (Job 1:6).

God knew that Satan was intent on attacking Job.

Satan can be at only one place at a time (Job 1:6-7). His demons aid him in his work; but as a created being, he is limited.

Satan cannot see into our minds or foretell the future (Job 1:9-11). If he could, he would have known that Job would not break under pressure.

Because Satan can do nothing without God's permission (Job 1:12), God's people can overcome his attacks through God's power.

God puts limitations on what Satan can do (Job 1:12; Job 2:6). Satan's response to the Lord's question (Job 1:7) tells us that Satan is real and active on earth.

Knowing this about Satan should cause us to remain close to the One who is greater than Satan—God himself.

Could you trust God if you lost everything?

Job stood up and tore his robe in grief. Then he shaved his head and fell to the ground before God.

He said:
"I came naked from my mother's womb,
And I will be stripped of everything when I die.
The Lord gave me everything I had,
And the Lord has taken it away.
Praise the name of the Lord!"

In all of this, Job did not sin by blaming God. Job 1:20-22

Chapter 4



Faith does not guarantee prosperity.

But Job replied, "You talk like a godless woman. Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?" So in all this, Job said nothing wrong. Job 2:10

Many people think that believing in God protects them from trouble, so when calamity comes, they question God's goodness and justice.

But the message of Job is that you should not give up on God because he allows you to have bad experiences. Faith in God does not guarantee personal prosperity, and lack of faith does not guarantee troubles in this life. If this were so, people would believe in God simply to get rich.

God is capable of rescuing us from suffering, but he may also allow suffering to come for reasons we cannot understand. It is Satan's strategy to get us to doubt God at exactly this moment.

Here Job shows a perspective broader than seeking his own personal comfort. If we always knew why we were suffering, our faith would have no room to grow.

Faith that is linked to optimism

I trust in the Lord for protection.
So why do you say to me,
"Fly to the mountains for safety!"

The wicked are stringing their bows
And setting their arrows in the bowstrings
They shoot from the shadows at those who do right.
The foundations of law and order have collapsed.
What can the righteous do?"

But the Lord is in his holy Temple;
The Lord still rules from heaven.
He watches everything closely,
Examining everyone on earth.
Psalm 11:1-4

David was forced to flee for safety several times. Being God's anointed king did not make him immune to injustice and hatred from others. This psalm may have been written when he was being hunted by Saul (1 Samuel 18-31) or during the days of Absalom's rebellion (2 Samuel 15-18).

In both instances, David fled, but not as if all was lost. He knew God was in control. While David wisely avoided trouble, he did not fearfully run away from his troubles.

David seems to be speaking to those who are advising him to run from his enemies. David's faith contrasted dramatically with the fear of the advisers who tell him to flee.

Faith in God keeps us from losing hope and helps us resist fear. David's advisers were afraid because they saw only frightening circumstances and crumbling foundations.

David was comforted and optimistic because he knew God was greater than anything his enemies could bring against him (Psalm 7:10; Psalm 16:1; Psalm 31:2-3).

When the foundations are shaking and you wish you could hide, remember that God is still in control. His power is not diminished by any turn of events.

Nothing happens without his knowledge and permission. When you feel like running away—run to God. He will restore justice and goodness on the earth in his good time.

When you feel stagnant in faith.

Restore to me again the joy of your salvation,
And make me willing to obey you. Psalm 51:12

Do you ever feel stagnant in your faith, as though you are just going through the motions? Has sin ever driven a wedge between you and God, making him seem distant? David felt this way.

He had sinned with Bathsheba and had just been confronted by Nathan the prophet. In his prayer he cried, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation.”

God wants us to be close to him and to experience his full and complete life. But sin that remains unconfessed makes such intimacy impossible.

Confess your sin to God. You may still have to face some earthly consequences, as David did, but God will give back the joy of your relationship with him.

Faith comes alive when we apply Scripture.

Give discernment to me, your servant;
Then I will understand your decrees. Psalm 119:125

The psalmist asked God for discernment. Faith comes alive when we apply Scripture to our daily tasks and concerns. We need discernment so we can understand, and we need the desire to apply Scripture where we need help.

The Bible is like medicine—it goes to work only when we apply it to the affected areas. As you read the Bible, be alert for lessons, commands, or examples that you can put into practice.

Faith won't eliminate feelings of rejection or disappointment.

This message came to me concerning the land of Babylonia:
Disaster is roaring down on you from the desert, like a whirlwind sweeping in from the Negev.

I see an awesome vision: I see you plundered and destroyed. Go ahead, you Elamites and Medes, take part in the siege. Babylon will fall, and the groaning of all the nations she enslaved will end.
Jeremiah 21:1-2

King Zedekiah probably was referring to God's deliverance of Jerusalem from Sennacherib, king of Assyria, in the days of Hezekiah (Isaiah 36-37). But Zedekiah's hopes were dashed. He was Judah's last ruler during the time of the exile of 586 B.C.

Pashhur came to the prophet for help. (This is not the same Pashhur as in Jeremiah 20:1.) God still had work for Jeremiah to do.

In living out our faith, we may find that rejection, disappointment, or hard work has brought us to the point of despondency. But we are still needed. God has important work for us as well.

Being faithful regardless of the circumstances.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied, "O Nebuchadnezzar, We do not need to defend ourselves before you.

If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. But even if he doesn't, Your Majesty can be sure that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up. Daniel 3:16-18

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were pressured to deny God, but they chose to be faithful to him no matter what happened! They trusted God to deliver them, but they were determined to be faithful regardless of the consequences.

If God always rescued those who were true to him, Christians would not need faith. Their religion would be a great insurance policy, and there would be lines of selfish people ready to sign up.

We should be faithful to serve God whether he intervenes on our behalf or not. Our eternal reward is worth any suffering we may have to endure first.

Is yours faith real?

Don't just say, 'We're safe—we're the descendants of Abraham.' That proves nothing. God can change these stones here into children of Abraham.

Even now the ax of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever your roots. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire. Matthew 3:9-10

Just as a fruit tree is expected to bear fruit, God's people should produce a crop of good deeds. God has no use for people who call themselves Christians but do nothing about it.

Like many people in John's day who were God's people in name only, we are of no value if we are Christians in name only. If others can't see our faith in the way we treat them, we may not be God's people at all.

God's message hasn't changed since the Old Testament—people will be judged for their unproductive lives. God calls us to be *active* in our obedience. John compared people who claim they believe God but don't live for God to unproductive trees that will be cut down.

To be productive for God, we must obey his teachings, resist temptation, actively serve and help others, and share our faith. How productive are you for God?

Faith doesn't always exempt us from suffering.

The high priest and his friends, who were Sadducees, reacted with violent jealousy. They arrested the apostles and put them in the jail. Acts 5:17-18

The religious leaders were jealous—Peter and the apostles were already commanding more respect than they had ever received. The difference, however, was that the religious leaders demanded respect and reverence for themselves; the apostles' goal was to bring respect and reverence to God.

The apostles were respected not because they demanded it, but because they deserved it.

The apostles experienced power to do miracles, great boldness in preaching, and God's presence in their lives, yet they were not free from hatred and persecution. They were arrested, put in jail, beaten, and slandered by community leaders. Faith in God does not make troubles disappear; it makes troubles appear less frightening because it puts them in the right perspective.

Don't expect everyone to react favorably when you share something as dynamic as your faith in Christ. Some will be jealous, afraid, or threatened. Expect some negative reactions, and remember that you must be more concerned about serving God than about the reactions of people.

Women received their loved ones back again from death. But others trusted God and were tortured, preferring to die rather than turn from God and be free. They placed their hope in the resurrection to a better life.

Some were mocked, and their backs were cut open with whips. Others were chained in dungeons. Some died by stoning, and some were sawed in half; others were killed with the sword.

Some went about in skins of sheep and goats, hungry and oppressed and mistreated. They were too good for this world. They wandered over deserts and mountains, hiding in caves and holes in the ground.

All of these people we have mentioned received God's approval because of their faith, yet none of them received all that God had promised. Hebrews 11:35-39

Many think that pain is the exception in the Christian life. When suffering occurs, they say, "Why me?" They feel as though God deserted them, or perhaps they accuse him of not being as dependable as they thought. In reality, however, we live in an evil world filled with suffering, even for believers.

But God is still in control. He allows some Christians to become martyrs for the faith, and he allows others to survive persecution. Rather than asking, "Why me?" it is much more helpful to ask, "Why not me?"

Our faith and the values of this world are on a collision course. If we expect pain and suffering to come, we will not be shocked when it hits. But we can also take comfort in knowing that Jesus also suffered.

He understands our fears, our weaknesses, and our disappointments (see Hebrews 2:16-18; Hebrews 4:14-16). He promised never to leave us (Matthew 28:18-20), and he intercedes on our behalf (Hebrews 7:24-25). In times of pain, persecution, or suffering we should trust confidently in Christ.

Chapter 5



Disciples were not always strong in faith.

One day as Jesus was walking along the shores of the Sea of Galilee he saw Simon and his brother, Andrew, fishing with a net, for they were commercial fishermen.

Jesus called out to them, "Come, be my disciples, and I will show you how to fish for people!" And they left their nets at once and went with him.

A little farther up the shore Jesus saw Zebedee's sons, James and John, in a boat mending their nets. He called them, too, and immediately they left their father, Zebedee, in the boat with the hired men and went with him. Mark 1:16-20

We often assume that Jesus' disciples were great men of faith from the first time they met Jesus. But they had to grow in their faith just as all believers do (Mark 14:48-50, 66-72; John 14:1-9; John 20:26-29). This is apparently not the only time Jesus called Peter (Simon), James, and John to follow him (see Luke 5:1-11 and John 1:35-42 for two other times). Although it took time for Jesus' call and his message to get through, the disciples *followed*. In the same

way, we may question and falter, but we must never stop following Jesus.

What motivates does your faith have?

Here is a sample of John's preaching to the crowds that came for baptism: "You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee God's coming judgment? Luke 3:7

What motivates your faith—fear of the future, or a desire to be a better person in a better world? Some people wanted to be baptized by John so they could escape eternal punishment, but they didn't turn to God for salvation. John had harsh words for such people. He knew that God values reformation above ritual. Is your faith motivated by a desire for a new, changed life, or is it only like a vaccination or insurance policy against possible disaster?

The relationship between faith and deeds

Prove by the way you live that you have really turned from your Sins, and turned to God. Don't just say, God can change these stones into children of Abraham.

Even now the ax of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever your roots. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire." Luke 3:8-9;

Many of John's hearers were shocked when he said that being Abraham's descendants was not enough for God. The religious leaders relied more on their family lines than on their faith for their standing with God. For them, religion was inherited.

But a personal relationship with God is not handed down from parents to children. Everyone has to commit to it on his or her own. Don't rely on someone else's faith for your salvation. Put your own faith in Jesus, and then exercise it every day.

For we who worship God in the Spirit are the only ones who are truly circumcised. We put no confidence in human effort. Instead, we boast about what Christ Jesus has done for us. Phil. 3:2-3;

Selfish ambition can ruin a church, but genuine humility can build it. Being humble involves having a true perspective about ourselves (see Romans 12:3).

It does not mean that we should put ourselves down. Before God, we are sinners, saved only by God's grace, but we *are* saved and therefore have great worth in God's kingdom.

We are to lay aside selfishness and treat others with respect and common courtesy. Considering others' interests as more important than our own links us with Christ, who was a true example of humility!

My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim that you have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favor some people more than others? James 2:1;

Commitment is an essential part of faith. You cannot be a Christian simply by affirming the right doctrines or agreeing with Biblical facts (James 2:19). You must commit your mind and heart to Christ. Right actions are the natural by-products of true faith.

A genuine Christian will have a changed life (James 2:18). Faith without good deeds doesn't do anybody any good—it is useless (James 2:14-17).

James's teachings are consistent with Paul's teaching that we receive salvation by faith alone. Paul emphasizes the purpose of faith—to bring salvation. James emphasizes the results of faith—a changed life.

James condemns acts of favoritism. Often we treat a well-dressed, impressive-looking person better than someone who looks shabby.

We do this because we would rather identify with successful people than with apparent failures. The irony, as James reminds us, is that the supposed winners may have gained their impressive lifestyle at our expense.

In addition, the rich find it difficult to identify with the Lord Jesus, who came as a humble servant. Are you easily impressed by status, wealth, or fame? Are you partial to the “haves” while ignoring the “have knots”? This attitude is sinful. God views all people as equals, and if he favors anyone, it is the poor and the powerless. We should follow his example.

Now someone may argue, "Some people have faith; others have good deeds." I say, "I can't see your faith if you don't have good deeds, but I will show you my faith through my good deeds."
James 2:18;

While it is true that our good deeds can never earn salvation, true faith always results in a changed life and good deeds. Paul speaks against those who try to be saved by deeds instead of true faith; James speaks against those who confuse mere intellectual assent with true faith. After all, even demons know who Jesus is, but they

don't obey him (James 2:19). True faith involves a commitment of your whole self to God.

You can be sure that the one who brings that person back will save that sinner from death and bring about the forgiveness of many sins. James 5:20;

The book of James emphasizes faith in action. Right living is the evidence and result of faith. The church must serve with compassion, speak lovingly and truthfully, live in obedience to God's commands, and love one another. The body of believers ought to be an example of heaven on earth, drawing people to Christ through love for God and each other.

If we truly believe God's Word, we will *live* it day by day. God's Word is not merely something we read or think about, but something we do. Belief, faith, and trust must have hands and feet—ours!

But those who fail to develop these virtues are blind or, at least, very shortsighted. They have already forgotten that God has cleansed them from their old life of sin. 2 Peter 1:9

Our faith must go beyond what we believe; it must become a dynamic part of all we do, resulting in good fruit and spiritual maturity. Salvation does not depend on good deeds, but it results in good deeds. A person who claims to be saved while remaining unchanged does not understand faith or what God has done for him or her.

And now, dear children, continue to live in fellowship with Christ so that when he returns, you will be full of courage and not shrink back from him in shame. Since we know that God is always

right, we also know that all who do what is right are his children. 1
John 2:28-29

The visible proof of being a Christian is right behavior. Many people do good deeds but don't have faith in Jesus Christ. Others claim to have faith but rarely produce good deeds. A deficit in either faith or right behavior will be a cause for shame when Christ returns. Because true faith always results in good deeds, those who claim to have faith *and* who consistently do what is right are true believers. Good deeds cannot produce salvation (see Ephes. 2:8-9), but they are necessary proof that true faith is actually present (James 2:14-17).

Chapter 6



New believers can also share their faith.

As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at his tax-collection booth. "Come, be my disciple," Jesus said to him. So Levi got up and followed him.

That night Levi invited Jesus and his disciples to be his dinner guests, along with his fellow tax collectors and many other notorious sinners. (There were many people of this kind among the crowds that followed Jesus.) Mark 2:14-15

The day that Levi met Jesus, Levi held a meeting at his house to introduce others to Jesus. Levi didn't waste any time starting to witness! Some people feel that new believers should wait for maturity or training before they begin to tell others about Christ. But like Levi, new believers can share their faith right away with whatever knowledge, skill, or experience they already have.

Faith of the royal official

Jesus asked, "Must I do miraculous signs and wonders before you people will believe in me?" John 4:48

This miracle was more than a favor to one official; it was a sign to all the people. John's Gospel was written to all mankind to urge faith in Christ. Here a government official had faith that Jesus could do what he claimed. The official believed; *then* he saw a miraculous sign.

Our faith affects others.

Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a sleeping mat. They tried to push through the crowd to Jesus, but they couldn't reach him.

So they went up to the roof, took off some tiles, and lowered the sick man down into the crowd, still on his mat, right in front of Jesus.

Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the man, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Luke 5:18-20

Why some may resist your faith.

Their judgment is based on this fact: The light from heaven came into the world, but they loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil.

They hate the light because they want to sin in the darkness. They stay away from the light for fear their sins will be exposed and they will be punished.

But those who do what is right come to the light gladly, so everyone can see that they are doing what God wants."
John 3:19-21

Many people don't want their lives exposed to God's light because they are afraid of what will be revealed. They don't want to be changed. Don't be surprised when these same people are threatened by your desire to obey God and do what is right, because they are afraid that the light in you may expose some of the darkness in their lives. Rather than giving in to discouragement, keep praying that they will come to see how much better it is to live in light than in darkness.

Faith is often proved through persecution.

"God blesses you when you are mocked and persecuted and lied about because you are my followers.

Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted, too.
Matthew 5:11-12

Jesus said to rejoice when we're persecuted. Persecution can be good because (1) it takes our eyes off earthly rewards, (2) it strips away superficial belief, (3) it strengthens the faith of those who endure, and (4) our attitude through it serves as an example to others who follow.

We can be comforted to know that God's greatest prophets were persecuted (Elijah, Jeremiah, Daniel). The fact that we are being persecuted proves that we have been faithful; faithless people would be unnoticed. In the future God will reward the faithful by receiving them into his eternal kingdom where there is no more persecution.

Faith alone brings eternal life.

"Not all people who sound religious are really godly. They may refer to me as 'Lord,' but they still won't enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The decisive issue is whether they obey my Father in heaven.

On judgment day many will tell me, 'Lord, Lord, we prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.' But I will reply, 'I never knew you. Go away; the things you did were unauthorized.' Matthew 7:21-23;

Jesus exposed those people who sounded religious but had no personal relationship with him. On “that day” (the day of judgment), only our relationship with Christ—our acceptance of him as Savior and our obedience to him—will matter. Many people think that if they are “good” people and say religious things, they will be rewarded with eternal life. In reality, faith in Christ is what will count at the judgment.

I am shocked that you are turning away so soon from God, who in his love and mercy called you to share the eternal life he gives through Christ. You are already following a different way.
Galatians 1:6

Some people were preaching “a different gospel.” They were teaching that to be saved, Gentile believers had to follow Jewish laws and customs, especially the rite of circumcision.

Faith in Christ was not enough. This message undermined the truth of the good news that salvation is a gift, not a reward for certain deeds. Jesus Christ has made this gift available to all people, not just to Jews.

Beware of people who say that we need more than simple faith in Christ to be saved. When people set up additional requirements for salvation, they deny the power of Christ's death on the cross.

The difference between faith and belief

When Jesus arrived on the other side of the lake in the land of the Gadarenes, two men who were possessed by demons met him. They lived in a cemetery and were so dangerous that no one could go through that area. Matthew 8:28

The region of the Gadarenes is located southeast of the Sea of Galilee, near the town of Gadara, one of the most important cities of the region (see map). Gadara was a member of the Decapolis.

These ten cities with independent governments were largely inhabited by Gentiles, which explains the herd of pigs (Matthew 8:30). The Jews did not raise pigs because pigs were considered unclean and thus unfit to eat.

Demon-possessed people are under the control of one or more demons. Demons are fallen angels who joined Satan in his rebellion against God and are now evil spirits under Satan's control.

They help Satan tempt people to sin and have great destructive powers.

But whenever Jesus confronts them, they lose their power. These demons recognized Jesus as God's Son (Matthew 8:29), but they

didn't think they had to obey him. Just believing is not enough (see James 2:19 for a discussion of belief and devils).

Faith is more than belief. By faith, you accept what Jesus has done for you, receive him as the only one who can save you from sin, and live out your faith by obeying his commands.

Matthew says there were two demon-possessed men, while Mark and Luke refer only to one. Apparently Mark and Luke mention only the man who did the talking.

According to Jewish ceremonial laws, the men Jesus encountered were unclean in three ways: they were Gentiles (non-Jews), they were demon-possessed, and they lived in a graveyard. Jesus helped them anyway.

We should not turn our backs on people who are “unclean” or repulsive to us, or who violate our moral standards and religious beliefs. Instead, we must realize that every human individual is a unique creation of God, needing to be touched by his love.

When it isn't popular to believe.

Because of the miraculous signs he did in Jerusalem at the Passover celebration, many people were convinced that he was indeed the Messiah.

But Jesus didn't trust them, because he knew what people were really like. No one needed to tell him about human nature. John 2:23-25

The Son of God knows all about human nature. Jesus was well aware of the truth of Jeremiah 17:9, which states, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.

Who can understand it?" Jesus was discerning, and he knew that the faith of some followers was superficial.

Some of the same people claiming to believe in Jesus at this time would later yell "Crucify him!" It's easy to believe when it is exciting and everyone else believes the same way.

But keep your faith firm even when it isn't popular to follow Christ.

Waiting strengthens faith

"Look!" the man exclaimed. "I told you once. Didn't you listen? Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?"

Then they cursed him and said, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.

We know God spoke to Moses, but as for this man, we don't know anything about him."

"Why, that's very strange!" the man replied. "He healed my eyes, and yet you don't know anything about him! Matthew 9:27-30

Jesus didn't respond immediately to the blind men's pleas. He waited to see if they had faith. Not everyone who says he wants help really believes God can help him. Jesus may have waited and questioned these men to emphasize and increase their faith.

When you think that God is too slow in answering your prayers, consider that he might be testing you as he did the blind men. Do you believe that God can help you? Do you *really* want his help?

Taking the final step in faith.

They still didn't understand the significance of the miracle of the multiplied loaves, for their hearts were hard and they did not believe. Mark 6:52

There are no excuses for not believing.

"What horrors await you, Korazin and Bethsaida. For if the miracles I did in you had been done in wicked Tyre and Sidon, their people would have sat in deep repentance long ago, clothed in sackcloth and throwing ashes on their heads to show their remorse.

I assure you, Tyre and Sidon will be better off on the judgment day than you! Matthew 11:21-24

Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom were ancient cities with a long-standing reputation for wickedness (Genesis 18-19; Ezekiel 27-28).

God destroyed each for its evil. The people of Bethsaida, Korazin, and Capernaum saw Jesus firsthand, and yet they stubbornly refused to repent of their sins and believe in him.

Jesus said that if some of the wickedest cities in the world had seen him, they would have repented. Because Bethsaida, Korazin, and Capernaum saw Jesus and didn't believe, they would suffer even greater punishment than that of the wicked cities who didn't see Jesus.

Similarly, nations and cities with churches on every corner and Bibles in every home will have no excuse on judgment day if they do not repent and believe.

What to do when your faith falters

But when he looked around at the high waves, he was terrified and began to sink. "Save me, Lord!" he shouted.

Instantly Jesus reached out his hand and grabbed him. "You don't have much faith," Jesus said. "Why did you doubt me?"

Matthew 14:30-31

Although we start out with good intentions, sometimes our faith falters. This doesn't necessarily mean we have failed. When Peter's faith faltered, he reached out to Christ, the only one who could help.

He was afraid, but he still looked to Christ. When you are apprehensive about the troubles around you and doubt Christ's presence or ability to help, you must remember that he is the *only* one who can really help.

Turning small faith into sufficient faith.

Jesus replied, "You stubborn, faithless people! How long must I be with you until you believe? How long must I put up with you?

Bring the boy to me." Then Jesus rebuked the demon in the boy, and it left him. From that moment the boy was well.

Afterward the disciples asked Jesus privately, "Why couldn't we cast out that demon?"

"You didn't have enough faith," Jesus told them. "I assure you, even if you had faith as small as a mustard seed you could say to

this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it would move. Nothing would be impossible." Matthew 17:17-20

The disciples were unable to drive out this demon, and they asked Jesus why. He pointed to their lack of faith.

It is the power of God, not our faith, that moves mountains, but faith must be present to do so. The mustard seed was the smallest particle imaginable.

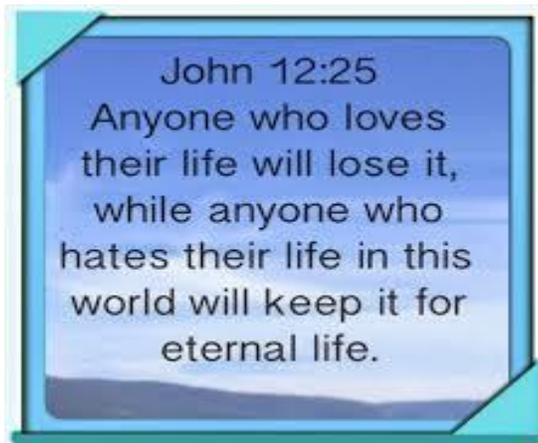
Even small or undeveloped faith would have been sufficient. Perhaps the disciples had tried to drive out the demon with their own ability rather than God's. There is great power in even a little faith when God is with us.

If we feel weak or powerless as Christians, we should examine our faith, making sure we are trusting not in our own abilities to produce results, but in God's.

Jesus wasn't condemning the disciples for substandard faith; he was trying to show how important faith would be in their future ministry.

If you are facing a problem that seems as big and immovable as a mountain, turn your eyes from the mountain and look to Christ for more faith. Only then will your work for him become useful and vibrant.

Chapter 7



Ways people lose faith.

"How terrible it will be for anyone who causes others to sin. Temptation to do wrong is inevitable, but how terrible it will be for the person who does the tempting. Matthew 18:7

Jesus warned the disciples about two ways to cause "little ones" to sin: tempting them (Matthew 18:7-9) and neglecting or demeaning them (Matthew 18:10-14).

As leaders, we are to help young people or new believers avoid anything or anyone that could cause them to stumble in their faith and lead them to sin.

We must never take lightly the spiritual education and protection of the young in age and in the faith.

Anything is possible.

"What do you mean, 'If I can'?" Jesus asked. "Anything is possible if a person believes." Mark 9:23

Jesus' words do not mean that we can automatically obtain anything we want if we just think positively. Jesus meant that anything is *possible* if we believe, because nothing is too difficult for God. We cannot have everything we pray for as if by magic; but with faith, we can have everything we need to serve him.

Faith is an attitude of expectation.

Soon a gale swept down upon them as they rowed, and the sea grew very rough

They were three or four miles out when suddenly they saw Jesus walking on the water toward the boat. They were terrified. John 6:18-19

The Sea of Galilee is 650 feet below sea level, 150 feet deep, and surrounded by hills. These physical features make it subject to sudden windstorms that would cause extremely high waves.

Such storms were expected on this lake, but they were nevertheless frightening. When Jesus came to the disciples during a storm, walking on the water (three and a half miles from shore), he told them not to be afraid.

We often face spiritual and emotional storms and feel tossed about like a small boat on a big lake. In spite of terrifying circumstances, if we trust our lives to Christ for his safekeeping, he will give us peace in any storm.

The disciples, terrified, probably thought they were seeing a ghost (Mark 6:49). But if they had thought about all they had already seen Jesus do,

They could have accepted this miracle. They were frightened—they didn't expect Jesus to come, and they weren't prepared for his help. Faith is a mind-set that *expects* God to act. When we act on this expectation, we can overcome our fears.

Faith must be put to work.

He noticed a fig tree beside the road. He went over to see if there were any figs on it, but there were only leaves. Then he said to it, "May you never bear fruit again!" And immediately the fig tree withered up. Matthew 21:19

Why did Jesus curse the fig tree? This was not a thoughtless, angry act, but an acted-out parable. Jesus was showing his anger at religion without substance.

Just as the fig tree looked good from a distance but was fruitless on close examination, so the temple looked impressive at first glance, but its sacrifices and other activities were hollow because they were not done to worship God sincerely (see Matthew 21:43).

If you only appear to have faith without putting it to work in your life, you are like the fig tree that withered and died because it bore no fruit. Genuine faith means bearing fruit for God's kingdom.

Use faith as a constant process.

The father instantly replied, "I do believe, but help me not to doubt!" Mark 9:24

The attitude of trust and confidence that the Bible calls *belief* or *faith* (Hebrews 11:1, 6) is not something we can obtain without help. Faith is a gift from God (Ephes. 2:8-9).

No matter how much faith we have, we never reach the point of being self-sufficient.

Faith is not stored away like money in the bank. Growing in faith is a constant process of daily renewing our trust in Jesus.

"I assure you, anyone who believes in me already has eternal life. John 6:47

Believes as used here means "continues to believe." We do not believe merely once; we keep on believing in and trusting Jesus.

The religious leaders frequently asked Jesus to prove to them why he was better than the prophets they already had. Jesus here referred to the manna that Moses had given their ancestors in the desert.

This bread was physical and temporal. The people ate it, and it sustained them for a day. But they had to get more bread every day, and this bread could not keep them from dying. Jesus, who is much greater than Moses, offers himself as the spiritual bread from heaven that satisfies completely and leads to eternal life.

Prayer aids faith

Jesus replied, "This kind can be cast out only by prayer."
Mark 9:29

The disciples would often face difficult situations that could be resolved only through prayer. Prayer is the key that unlocks faith in our lives. Effective prayer needs both an attitude—complete dependence—and an action—asking.

Prayer demonstrates our reliance on God as we humbly invite him to fill us with faith and power. There is no substitute for prayer, especially in circumstances that seem impossible.

How much faith is necessary?

"Even if you had faith as small as a mustard seed," the Lord answered, "you could say to this mulberry tree, 'May God uproot you and throw you into the sea,' and it would obey you! Luke 17:6

A mustard seed is small, but it is alive and growing. Like a tiny seed, a small amount of genuine faith in God will take root and grow. Almost invisible at first, it will begin to spread, first under the ground and then visibly.

Although each change will be gradual and imperceptible, soon this faith will have produced major results that will uproot and destroy competing loyalties. We don't need more faith; a tiny seed of faith is enough, if it is alive and growing.

Having childlike faith.

But when Jesus saw what was happening, he was very displeased with his disciples. He said to them, "Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Mark 10:14

Adults are not as trusting as little children. To feel secure, all children need is a loving look and gentle touch from someone who cares. Complete intellectual understanding is not one of their requirements.

They believe us if they trust us. Jesus said that people should believe in him with this kind of childlike faith. We should not have to understand all the mysteries of the universe; it should be enough to know that God loves us and provides forgiveness for our sin.

This doesn't mean that we should be childish or immature, but we should trust God with a child's simplicity and receptivity.

One day some parents brought their little children to Jesus so he could touch them and bless them, but the disciples told them not to bother him.

Then Jesus called for the children and said to the disciples, "Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

I assure you, anyone who doesn't have their kind of faith will never get into the Kingdom of God." Luke 18:15-17

Adults are not as trusting as little children. To feel secure, all children need is a loving look and gentle touch from someone who cares. Complete intellectual understanding is not one of their requirements. They believe us if they trust us.

Jesus said that people should believe in him with this kind of childlike faith. We should not have to understand all the mysteries of the universe; it should be enough to know that God loves us and provides forgiveness for our sin. This doesn't mean that we should be childish or immature, but we should trust God with a child's simplicity and receptivity.

Faith results in changed behavior.

Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have overcharged people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!"
Luke 19:8

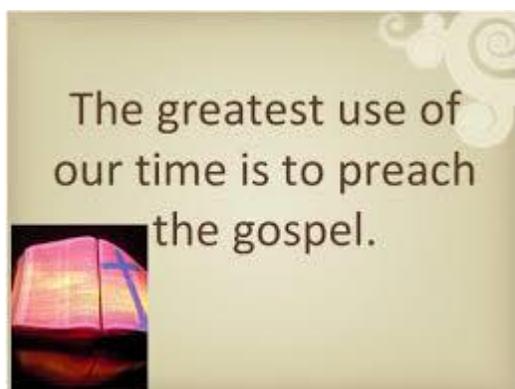
Judging from the crowd's reaction to him, Zacchaeus must have been a very crooked tax collector. But after he met Jesus, he realized that his life needed straightening out. By giving to the poor and making restitution—with generous interest—to those he had cheated, Zacchaeus demonstrated inward change by outward action. It is not enough to follow Jesus in your head or heart alone. You must show your faith by changed behavior. Has your faith resulted in action? What changes do you need to make?

Wealth is not always a by-product of faith.

The disciples were astounded. "Then who in the world can be saved?" they asked. Mark 10:26

The disciples were amazed. Wealth is not a sign of faith or of partiality on God's part.

Chapter 8



Not admitting your faith.

Many people, including some of the Jewish leaders, believed in him. But they wouldn't admit it to anyone because of their fear that the Pharisees would expel them from the synagogue. For they loved human praise more than the praise of God. John 12:42-43

Along with those who refused to believe, many believed but refused to admit it.

This is just as bad, and Jesus had strong words for such people (see Matthew 10:32-33). People who will not take a stand for Jesus are afraid of rejection or ridicule.

Many Jewish leaders wouldn't admit to faith in Jesus because they feared excommunication from the synagogue (which was their livelihood) and loss of their prestigious place in the community. But the praise of others is fickle and short-lived.

We should be much more concerned about God's eternal acceptance than about the temporary approval of other people.

Faith is life's central issue.

Then Jesus presented them with a question. "Why is it," he asked, "that the Messiah is said to be the son of David? For David wrote in the book of Psalms:

'The Lord said to my Lord,
Sit in honor at my right hand
Until I humble your enemies,
Making them a footstool under your feet.'
Luke 20:41-44

The Pharisees and Sadducees had asked their questions. Then Jesus turned the tables and asked them a question that went right to the heart of the matter—what they thought about the Messiah's identity.

The Pharisees knew that the Messiah would be a descendant of David, but they did not understand that he would be more than a human descendant—he was God in the flesh.

Jesus quoted from Psalm 110:1 to show that David knew that the Messiah would be both human and divine. The Pharisees expected only a human ruler to restore Israel's greatness as in the days of David and Solomon.

The central issue of life is what we believe about Jesus. Other spiritual questions are irrelevant unless we first decide to believe that Jesus is who he said he is. The Pharisees and Sadducees could not do this. They remained confused over Jesus' identity.

Can your faith withstand persecution?

"No!" Peter insisted. "Not even if I have to die with you! I will never deny you!" And all the other disciples vowed the same.

Matthew 26:35

All the disciples declared that they would die before disowning Jesus. A few hours later, however, they all scattered. Talk is cheap. It is easy to say we are devoted to Christ, but our claims are meaningful only when they are tested in the crucible of persecution. How strong is your faith? Is it strong enough to stand up under intense trial?

It is never too late to believe in Jesus.

One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed, "So you're the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you're at it!"

But the other criminal protested, "Don't you fear God even when you are dying?"

We deserve to die for our evil deeds, but this man hasn't done anything wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom."

And Jesus replied, "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise." Luke 23:39-43

As this man was about to die, he turned to Christ for forgiveness, and Christ accepted him.

This shows that our deeds don't save us—our faith in Christ does. It is never too late to turn to God. Even in his misery, Jesus had mercy on this criminal who decided to believe in him. Our lives will be much more useful and fulfilling if we turn to God early, but even those who repent at the very last moment will be with God in paradise.

What happens to unproductive believers who have no faith?

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. John 15:1

Christ is the vine, and God is the gardener who cares for the branches to make them fruitful. The branches are all those who claim to be followers of Christ.

The fruitful branches are true believers who by their living union with Christ produce much fruit. But those who become unproductive—those who turn back from following Christ after making a superficial commitment—will be separated from the vine.

Unproductive followers are as good as dead and will be cut off and tossed aside.

Stages of faith

Early Sunday morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. John 20:1

People who hear about the resurrection for the first time may need time before they can comprehend this amazing story.

Like Mary and the disciples, they may pass through four stages of belief.

- (1) At first, they may think the story is a fabrication, impossible to believe (John 20:2).
- (2) Like Peter, they may check out the facts and still be puzzled about what happened (John 20:6).
- (3) Only when they encounter Jesus personally are they able to accept the fact of the resurrection (John 20:16).
- (4) Then, as they commit themselves to the risen Lord and devote their lives to serving him, they begin to understand fully the reality of his presence with them (John 20:28).

Jesus' resurrection is the key to faith.

He isn't here! He has been raised from the dead, just as he said would happen. Come see where his body was lying. Matthew 28:6

Jesus' resurrection is the key to the Christian faith. Why?

- (1) Just as he promised, Jesus rose from the dead. We can be confident, therefore, that he will accomplish all he has promised. (2) Jesus' bodily resurrection shows us that the living Christ is ruler of God's eternal kingdom, not a false prophet or imposter.
- (2) We can be certain of our resurrection because he was resurrected. Death is not the end—there is future life.
- (3) The power that brought Jesus back to life is available to us to bring our spiritually dead selves back to life.
- (4) The resurrection is the basis for the church's witness to the world. Jesus is more than just a human leader; he is the Son of God.

Faith is based on facts.

In my first book I told you about everything Jesus began to do and teach until the day he ascended to heaven after giving his chosen apostles further instructions from the Holy Spirit.

During the forty days after his crucifixion, he appeared to the apostles from time to time and proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive. On these occasions he talked to them about the Kingdom of God. Acts 1:1-3

Jesus explained that with his coming, the kingdom of God was inaugurated. When he returned to heaven, God's kingdom would remain in the hearts of all believers through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

But the kingdom of God will not be fully realized until Jesus Christ comes again to judge all people and remove all evil from the world. Before that time, believers are to work to spread God's kingdom across the world.

The book of Acts records how this work was begun. What the early church started, we must continue.

Holy Spirit marks beginning of faith.

John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." Acts 1:5

At Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4) the Holy Spirit was made available to all who believed in Jesus.

We receive the Holy Spirit (are baptized with him) when we receive Jesus Christ. The baptism of the Holy Spirit must be understood in the light of his total work in Christians.

- (1) The Spirit marks the beginning of the Christian experience. We cannot belong to Christ without his Spirit (Romans 8:9); we cannot be united to Christ without his Spirit (1 Cor. 6:17); we cannot be adopted as his children without his Spirit (Romans 8:14-17; Galatians 4:6-7); we cannot be in the body of Christ except by baptism in the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13).
- (2) The Spirit is the power of our new lives. He begins a lifelong process of change as we become more like Christ (Galatians 3:3; Phil. 1:6). When we receive Christ by faith, we begin an immediate personal relationship with God. The Holy Spirit works in us to help us become like Christ.
- (3) The Spirit unites the Christian community in Christ (Ephes. 2:19-22). The Holy Spirit can be experienced by all, and he works through all (1 Cor. 12:11; Ephes. 4:4).

Share your faith no matter what the cost.

The council accepted his advice. They called in the apostles and had them flogged. Then they ordered them never again to speak in the name of Jesus, and they let them go.

The apostles left the high council rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus. And every day, in the Temple and in their homes, they continued to teach and preach this message: "The Messiah you are looking for is Jesus."
Acts 5:40-42

Peter and John were warned repeatedly not to preach, but they continued in spite of the threats. We, too, should live as Christ has asked us to, sharing our faith no matter what the cost. We may not be beaten or thrown in jail, but we may be ridiculed, ostracized, or slandered. To what extent are you willing to suffer for the sake of sharing the gospel with others?

God will help when your faith is under fire.

Paul realized that some members of the high council were Sadducees and some were Pharisees, so he shouted, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, as were all my ancestors! And I am on trial because my hope is in the resurrection of the dead!"

This divided the council—the Pharisees against the Sadducees—for the Sadducees say there is no resurrection or angels or spirits, but the Pharisees believe in all of these. Acts 23:6-8

The Sadducees and Pharisees were two groups of religious leaders, but with strikingly different beliefs.

The Pharisees believed in a bodily resurrection, but the Sadducees did not. The Sadducees adhered only to Genesis through Deuteronomy, which contain no explicit teaching on resurrection. Paul's words moved the debate away from himself and toward their festering controversy about the resurrection. The Jewish council was split.

Paul's sudden insight that the council was a mixture of Sadducees and Pharisees is an example of the power that Jesus promised to believers (Mark 13:9-11).

God will help us when we are under fire for our faith. Like Paul, we should always be ready to present our testimony. The Holy Spirit will give us power to speak boldly.

Why does God save us by faith alone?

So we are made right with God through faith and not by obeying the law. Romans 3:28

Most religions prescribe specific duties that must be performed to make a person acceptable to a god. Christianity is unique in teaching that the good deeds we do will not make us right with God.

No amount of human achievement or progress in personal development will close the gap between God's moral perfection and our imperfect daily performance. Good deeds are important, but they will not earn us eternal life.

Why does God save us by faith alone?

- (1) Faith eliminates the pride of human effort, because faith is not a deed that we do.
- (2) Faith exalts what God has done, not what people do.
- (3) Faith admits that we can't keep the law or measure up to God's standards—we need help.
- (4) Faith is based on our relationship with God, not our performance for God.

Chapter 9



How much faith do you need?

But people are declared righteous because of their faith, not because of their work. Romans 4:5

Why faith is key to Christian life.

Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of highest privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory.

We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they are good for us—they help us learn to endure. And endurance develops strength of character in us, and character strengthens our confident expectation of salvation.

And this expectation will not disappoint us. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love. Romans 5:2-5

As Paul states clearly in 1 Cor. 13:13, faith, hope, and love are at the heart of the Christian life. Our relationship with God begins with *faith*, which helps us realize that we are delivered from our past by Christ's death. *Hope* grows as we learn all that God has in mind for us; it gives us the promise of the future. And God's *love* fills our lives and gives us the ability to reach out to others.

What is weak faith?

Accept Christians who are weak in faith, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong. Romans 14:1

What is weak faith? Paul is speaking about immature faith that has not yet developed the muscle it needs to stand against external pressures.

For example, if a person who once worshiped idols were to become a Christian, he might understand perfectly well that Christ saved him through faith and that idols have no real power. Still, because of his past associations, he might be badly shaken if he knowingly ate meat that had been used in idol worship as part of a pagan ritual.

If a person who once worshiped God on the required Jewish holy days were to become a Christian, he might well know that Christ saved him through faith, not through his keeping of the law. Still, when the feast days came, he might feel empty and unfaithful if he didn't dedicate those days to God.

Paul responds to both weak brothers in love. Both are acting according to their consciences, but their honest scruples do not need to be made into rules for the church. Certainly some issues are central to the faith and worth fighting for—but many are based on individual differences and should not be legislated. Our

principle should be: In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in everything, love.

Talking about faith versus living it.

I know that some of you have become arrogant, thinking I will never visit you again. But I will come—and soon—if the Lord will let me, and then I'll find out whether these arrogant people are just big talkers or whether they really have God's power.

For the Kingdom of God is not just fancy talk; it is living by God's power. 1 Cor. 4:18-20

Some people talk a lot about faith, but that's all it is—talk. They may know all the right words to say, but their lives don't reflect God's power.

Paul says that the kingdom of God is to be *lived*, not just discussed. There is a big difference between knowing the right words and living them out. Don't be content to have the right answers about Christ. Let your life show that God's power is really working in you.

Faith does not free us from obedience.

So our aim is to please him always, whether we are here in this body or away from this body.

For we must all stand before Christ to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or evil we have done in our bodies. 2 Cor. 5:9-10

While eternal life is a free gift given on the basis of God's grace (Ephes. 2:8-9), each of us will still be judged by Christ. This

judgment will reward us for how we have lived. God's gracious gift of salvation does not free us from the requirement for faithful obedience. All Christians must give account for how they have lived (see Matthew 16:27; Romans 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 3:10-15).

Why faith is superior to the law.

Well then, why was the law given? It was given to show people how guilty they are. But this system of law was to last only until the coming of the child to whom God's promise was made. And there is this further difference.

God gave his laws to angels to give to Moses, who was the mediator between God and the people.

Now a mediator is needed if two people enter into an agreement, but God acted on his own when he made his promise to Abraham. Galatians 3:19-20

When God gave his promise to Abraham, he did it by himself alone, without angels or Moses as mediators. Although it is not mentioned in Exodus, Jews believed that the Ten Commandments had been given to Moses by angels (Stephen referred to this in his speech, see Acts 7:38, 53).

Paul was showing the superiority of salvation and growth by faith over trying to be saved by keeping the Jewish laws. Christ is the best and only way given by God for us to come to him (1 Tim. 2:5).

Paul lost his possessions, but not his faith.

And that is why I am suffering here in prison. But I am not ashamed of it, for I know the one in whom I trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until the day of his return. 2 Tim. 1:12

Paul was in prison, but that did not stop his ministry. He carried it on through others like Timothy. Paul had lost all his material possessions, but he would never lose his faith. He trusted God to use him regardless of his circumstances.

If your situation looks bleak, give your concerns to Christ. He will guard your faith and safely guard all you have entrusted to him until the day of his return. For more on our security in Christ, see Romans 8:38-39.

The phrase “guard what I have entrusted to him” could mean:

- (1) Paul knew that God would guard the souls of those converted through his preaching;
- (2) Paul trusted God to guard his own soul until Christ’s second coming; or
- (3) Paul was confident that, though he was in prison and facing death, God would carry out the gospel ministry through others such as Timothy. Paul may have expressed his confidence to encourage Timothy, who was undoubtedly discouraged by the problems in Ephesus and fearful of persecution. Even in prison, Paul knew that God was still in control. No matter what setbacks or problems we face, we can trust fully in God.

Faith combines assurance and anticipation.

What is faith? It is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see.

Hebrews 11:1

Two words describe faith: *sure* and *certain*. These two qualities need a secure beginning and ending point. The beginning point of faith is believing in God's character—he *is* who he says. The end point is believing in God's promises—he will *do* what he says.

When we believe that God will fulfill his promises even though we don't see those promises materializing yet, we demonstrate true faith (see John 20:24-31).

Paul's view of faith versus James's view of faith

Now someone may argue, "Some people have faith; others have good deeds." I say, "I can't see your faith if you don't have good deeds, but I will show you my faith through my good deeds."

James 2:18;

You see, Abraham was trusting God so much that he was willing to do whatever God told him to do. His faith was made complete by what he did—by his actions.

And so it happened just as the Scriptures say: "Abraham believed God, so God declared him to be righteous." He was even called "the friend of God." So you see, we are made right with God by what we do, not by faith alone. James 2:21-24

God will help us remain true to our faith.

And God, in his mighty power, will protect you until you receive this salvation, because you trust him. It will be revealed on the last day for all to see. 1 Peter 1:5

Never forget basics of faith.

I plan to keep on reminding you of these things—even though you already know them and are standing firm in the truth. Yes, I believe I should keep on reminding you of these things as long as I live. 2 Peter 1:12-15

Although the plan of salvation was a mystery to the Old Testament prophets, they still suffered persecution, and some even died for God. In contrast, some Jewish Christians who read Peter's letter had seen Jesus for themselves and knew why he came. They based their assurance on Jesus' death and resurrection. With their firsthand knowledge and personal experience of Jesus, their faith could be even stronger than that of the Old Testament prophets.

The world will always challenge your faith.

But grow in the special favor and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

To him be all glory and honor, both now and forevermore. Amen.
2 Peter 3:18

God may have seemed slow to these believers as they faced persecution every day and longed to be delivered. But God is not slow; he just is not on *our* timetable (Psalm 90:4). Jesus is waiting so that more sinners will repent and turn to him.

We must not sit and wait for Christ to return, but we should live with the realization that time is short and that we have important work to do. Be ready to meet Christ any time, even today; yet plan your course of service as though he may not return for many years.

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Additional comments and charts are taken from:

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