

Faith

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Introduction.

- A. One of the problems that we deal with in our spiritual walk is the tendency to overlook the forest for the trees. It's important for us to zero in on specific aspects of service, as we're going to be doing in our morning lessons for the next several weeks. However, as we do that, we also must remember that Christianity is not just about signing up for the encouragement group or the welcome group or the whatever. We need to do those things, but unless we are godly people throughout every aspect of our lives, those things won't matter.
- B. Thankfully, God's word is very good at reminding us to look at the big picture. There are several places in Scripture that remind us what it means to be spiritually well rounded, and one of the most prominent is 2 Peter 1:5-8. In this short text, Peter lays out the life's work of the Christian. If we aren't careful, though, the way that Peter describes this can be confusing. We can easily get the idea that we're supposed to fill up one level before we move on to the next, that we're done with faith before we get to virtue. Of course, Christianity isn't that sequential. However, it is true that we have to progress in a lower level before we make similar progress in an upper level, just like you need to expand the foundation of a house before you build the addition.
- C. This evening, then, let's look at the spiritual foundation described here: faith. This is a spiritual concept that has been used and abused by the denominational world around us, to the point where many people think it means little more than mental assent to the existence of God. Of course, genuine faith is far more than that, and it's essential to genuine Christianity. Let's learn why this is so this evening as we study faith.

I. What Is It?

- A. Naturally, before we move on to a discussion of the importance of faith, we have to figure out what it is. In this, as in so many different areas, the Bible is its own best dictionary, and we see the Scriptural definition of faith in Hebrews 11:1. This is a familiar passage to many of us, but I, at least, often find myself reading through it without thinking about what it actually means. Let's break it down tonight, starting with the second part. It says that faith is "the conviction of things not seen." Even though I have not perceived something myself, I am convinced that it is anyway. I have never seen Jesus, but I believe that He died and rose again. This is not some blind "leap of faith"; instead, I have been persuaded by the evidence for Jesus to accept Him.
- B. Likewise, this Scripture also teaches us that faith is "the substance of things hoped for." We often read this statement as saying the same thing as the first, but it's really not. Instead of being a belief in something that is true at the present time, it's a belief that something WILL happen in the future. For example, "faith" also describes my conviction that Jesus will return in the clouds, and the faithful will rise to meet Him in the air.
- C. Obviously, it's possible to have faith about any number of things for any number of reasons. When Linus on "Peanuts" waits in the pumpkin patch every Halloween to wait for the Great Pumpkin to appear, that's actually a bizarre kind of faith. However, in the Christian worldview, only one kind of faith is significant. We see it described in Romans 4:4-5. Basically, Paul here outlines two possible paths to eternal life in heaven. On the one hand, I can work to get there. I can live my life perfectly, without sinning even once, and demand that God let me into heaven because I've earned it. This is theoretically possible, but in reality, all of us mess it up. On the other hand, I can get to heaven through faith. I can believe that Christ died for the ungodly—that's the first part of the faith definition we worked through a moment ago—and I can believe that because His blood has cleansed me, on the day of judgment, I will be found righteous—that's the second part of our definition.
- D. The central idea of Christianity is that believing really does make it so. Because God has told me that Jesus died for me and promised me salvation if I put my hope in Him, if I accept both of those things as true and live accordingly, then God will hold up His end. On my own merits, I certainly don't deserve to have God count me as righteous. I don't deserve to go to heaven. However, through faith, I can be deemed righteous anyway.

II. What Does It Do?

- A. Certainly, faith would be important just on that basis alone. However, there are a number of other things that faith does. First of all, faith is what makes our prayers effective. Jesus discusses this result of faith in Matthew 21:21-22. In context, what provoked this comment was that Jesus told a fig tree to wither, and it withered, because Jesus knew that God would make it so. Through this, Jesus taught His disciples that if they asked God in faith for something to be done, it would happen. Of course, this statement is not meant to be taken absolutely. Jesus had more faith than any other man ever to live, and yet, His desperate prayers in the garden for salvation from humiliation and death were not answered as He wanted. Sometimes, we are mistaken about what would truly bring us the most happiness. Sometimes, it is simply necessary that we undergo suffering, and only God knows the reason why some of our prayers are denied. However, most of the

time, that isn't what is going to happen. Most of the time, when we approach God in faith, He will hear us and give us what we seek, especially if the blessing we want is spiritual in nature. Without faith, it doesn't work.

- B. In a broader sense, faith also acts by working together with works. James says so in James 2:21-22. Many in the religious world can't stand this idea. They've got the idea that faith is faith precisely because it DOESN'T do anything. Folks, that idea doesn't pass the common sense test. In all areas of our lives, we act on what we believe. Let's say that Lauren and I go on a cruise (never going to happen, by the way), but sadly, the cruise ship sinks. There I am, paddling around, when I see a Coast Guard boat off in the distance. I have faith that they're looking for me. What am I going to do about that? Am I going to keep doing what I'm doing, or am I going to raise a fuss so that they see me and save me? My faith is going to move me to action.
- C. In just the same way, if we have faith in the power of Jesus to save us, we're going to do whatever is necessary to ensure that He does. We're not just going to sit there quietly thinking "I believe, I believe." We're going to do what the Bible describes as "calling on the name of the Lord." We're going to be baptized for the forgiveness of our sins. That doesn't mean that we save ourselves, any more than calling out to the Coast Guard would mean that I rescued myself from shipwreck. It does mean that faith generates works.
- D. Finally, though, the most important thing that faith does is that it pleases God. This is the point that we see the Hebrews writer making in Hebrews 11:6. Notice how what the writer says here dovetails with our definition. We have to believe that God is—that's the conviction of things not seen part--and we have to believe that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him—that's the substance of things hoped for part. However, when we put those two parts together, when we have faith both in God's existence and in His promises, that's when we really achieve something spiritually. That's when we justify our own existence by pleasing our Creator. With faith, what would otherwise be impossible is attainable by anyone.

III. How Do I Get It?

- A. Clearly, then, faith is of central importance in our spiritual lives. It's something we must have, so what do we have to do to get it? In Scripture, we can identify three primary sources of faith. We see the first explained in Romans 10:17. We develop our faith by studying the word. It only makes sense that faith would be so word-dependent. Without the Scripture, we could gain some understanding of God simply by examining the natural world, but we wouldn't really know a great deal about His nature, and we would know nothing about His promises. Without what the Bible reveals about those things, life would be inevitably bleak and cheerless. However, through the Scripture, we learn of God's love for us, and of the hope that we can have of spending eternity with Him in heaven. Those things have to be the starting place and the center of Christian faith.
- B. This is something that I wish more Christians understood. In reality, the Bible is just as essential to our spiritual life as oxygen is to our physical life. Once we are deprived of either, we quickly die. I don't see a lot of people, at least not grownups, going around seeing how long they can hold their breath without suffering harm. Sadly, many of our brethren are far less aware of the dangers of word deprivation. They think it's not important to assemble three times a week to study God's book, and certainly they're not about to waste their valuable time in independently searching the Scriptures. Imperceptibly, they grow weaker and weaker, until their faith expires from lack of fuel, whether they're aware of it or not. Brethren, we can't let that happen to us. We need to keep our faith strong by maintaining our constant connection with the word.
- C. Second, though, we also can bolster our faith by looking to the example of more mature Christians, particularly those who rise to positions of leadership in the church. The Hebrews writer urges this course upon us in Hebrews 13:7. This is important because it makes faith real. When we look at people of faith in our own lives, we can't deny the power of their faith in theirs, and it teaches us to look for faith in our own.
- D. Along these lines, I can't help but think of my own uncle, Bob Bassford, who is still an elder at the church in Eastside where I grew up. Uncle Bob's life hasn't been all sunshine and roses. Many years ago, his six-year-old son Jeffrey was hit and killed by a car. His wife Sue suffers from advanced Alzheimer's, and her control of herself has degenerated to the point where he has to spend much of his time caring for her. In the midst of all of these storms of life, however, his faith has never wavered. Far from being embittered by all he has had to endure, he is one of the most dignified, kind, and gracious men I know. He has done immeasurable good in his life, and when his time comes, I know that he will commit his spirit to God with peace in his heart, and I am confident that the Lord will receive him into the eternal dwellings. I know that I will look to him all my life as an example of what a Christian and a man ought to be. There are men like that in this congregation too. Let's look to them. Let's study their lives, so that we can imitate the example of their faith.
- E. Finally, though, we find the fuel for our faith in the record of our own lives. We see David do this in 1 Samuel 17:37. He knew that God had gotten him through his battles with the lion and the bear, so he was confident that He would also protect him as he fought against Goliath. We can take encouragement from the same source. Many different paths have taken us into this assembly tonight, but all of us who are Christians can say one thing for certain. We've made it this far through the help of God, and we can all point to moments in our lives when the Lord has helped us. We need to remember those times, and look to them to bolster our faith.

Conclusion. If you want to live a life of faith, you can begin it this evening.