

Believing Is Seeing

HER HUSBAND had left her. He said he didn't love her anymore. There was someone else. I could see the hurt in her eyes. She had every right to be devastated and angry, yet she was filled with optimism.

"He's going to come back to me. He won't divorce me. And our relationship will be better than before." She had no interest in attending a divorce recovery workshop, she told me. Instead, she joined a support group of men and women whose spouses had left them but who were convinced that their marriages would be restored. They gathered to pray together and claim Bible promises about marriage restoration.

"How can you be so sure your marriage will be restored?" I asked her. She explained that she had faith.

Their divorce was finalized. She still insisted that he would come back to her. She said that when they were remarried their relationship would become the best that it would ever be. She said that she was absolutely convinced because she had faith.

Then, although he'd had no previous health problems and was only in his forties, her former husband unexpectedly died. And they never reconciled....

A couple came to talk to me about a problem. I knew their child was desperately ill and I assumed that was the topic. They talked about their love for their son and about how hard it was to see him suffer. Then they told me about another problem that significantly added to their pain.

Several people had called them, telling of non-traditional medical remedies that were sure to cure. Another person had given pointed religious advice:

"Your son will be healed if you have enough faith. Have faith and he will get better. It's not up to doctors, it's up to you. If you don't have faith, your son will die."

These parents loved their son and desperately wanted him to recover. And though they loved God and believed He had the power to heal, they did not feel they had the kind of faith that was being demanded of them. They were struggling with a sense of guilt that their son would die because of their shortage of faith. They wanted to know if God really operates that way, killing children because their parents don't have enough faith.

Their son did not die. He recovered....

Then there was the hardened professor's response when one of his students used the word "faith" in his classroom. "Faith is a crutch for the weak," he stated. "Faith is fantasy. It's wishful thinking. It makes no dif-

ference at all." He belittled the Christian students whom he quickly identified as if he were on some kind of witch hunt. He wrote cruel comments on any papers that reflected religious belief and seemed to take perverse satisfaction out of humiliating anyone who did not affirm his atheism.

Compare these true stories with what the Bible says:

We live by faith, not by sight. (2 Corinthians 5:7)

The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. (Galatians 5:6)

"If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." (Matthew 17:20)

Everything that does not come from faith is sin. (Romans 14:23)

When it comes to the meaning of faith, people run the gamut from strange to stupid to skeptical to sincere to scriptural. Our popular culture is loaded with references to faith. We talk about "blind faith," "faith healers," and deposits secured by the "full faith" of the United States government.

Faith is trust. Faith is believing in someone or something. I have faith in my wife. I trust her. I have faith in the highway bridge near my house. I trust it. Faith is believing that someone or something will do what they are supposed to do.

When Charleen and I were married, she promised that she would take me for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, and cling to me and to me alone, so long as we both shall live. I trust her to do all of that — what she promised and is expected to do as my wife.

The bridge is different. I don't expect the bridge to cling to me and to me alone so long as we both shall live. I just expect it to hold my car as I drive from one side to the other. That's what it is supposed to do.

I value faith. It would be impossible to live without it. If I didn't trust my wife, the bridge, doctors, money, or the water supply, life would be impossible.

The same goes for God. I trust Him. I have faith in Him. I am convinced that God will do what He is supposed to do — what He has promised to do — as God.

I especially value faith in God, because the things

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I trust Him for are far more important than anything else. I value faith in God because God will stick with me even if my marriage fails, the bridge collapses, the doctor goofs, or the currency becomes worthless.

I value faith in general because I couldn't live without it.

I value faith in God because I couldn't live now and I couldn't live forever without Him.

The Basis for Faith's Value

Too often people make faith into something it is not. In a sense they overvalue it. Let me explain.

The value of faith is never in faith itself. This seems so obvious, yet many make this mistake. They really believe that they can make something happen because of the power of their faith. But faith by itself is nothing. Faith on its own doesn't make anything happen.

I remember one time when we were living in Colorado and Charleen's parents had come for a visit. I can't recall the context, but I made a passing comment that something bad might happen. My mother-in-law said, "Don't say that. It might happen." (I'm not proud of the way I responded, but for purposes of illustration, I'll continue with the incident.) Later Charleen and I took them sightseeing in the mountains, and as we drove up a steep road I said, "Those rocks could fall down and crush the car." ("Don't say that. It might happen," came the reply.) As we went around a bend I said, "The front tire could blow out and we could go over the side and drop 2,000 feet." ("Don't say that. It might happen.") When we came back down the mountain I said, "The brakes might overheat and we won't be able to stop going down this road." ("Don't say that. It might happen.")

None of these bad things happened, because my saying so doesn't make bad things happen. Likewise, having faith or even saying so doesn't make good things happen. The value of faith is not in faith itself. The value of faith comes from its object.

Faith is like the electrical cord that comes with an appliance. The cord is the means to connect to the power that makes the appliance work. If you plug the cord into your ear, the refrigerator will not cool and the toaster will not toast. But if you plug the cord into an electrical outlet connected to a source of power, powerful things can happen.

Too many people have faith in the wrong object; they have faith in faith, in themselves, in their financial security, in their government. All of these can fail. The most valuable faith is faith in God, because it connects us to the greatest power in the universe.

Steps of Faith

There is a simple progression in the practical recipe of faith; it begins with conviction, moves to commit-

ment, and results in response.

First is the conviction that God is God and that He can do what He says He can do. When God says that He can give us peace in the middle of life's hurricanes, power to deal with evil, and salvation from hell, true faith says, "I am convinced that's true. God can do anything."

Conviction is not enough, however. According to James 2:19, even the demons are convinced God is God and shudder at the thought of Him. But they're not committed. For faith to do what it is supposed to do, it must move from conviction to commitment.

A long time ago I was convinced that WalMart was a good stock to buy. I read a lot of articles about it long before the company opened a store anywhere close to my home. Later, WalMart stock soared and the company became the largest retailer in the United States—although I never bought a single share of WalMart stock. I was right in my conviction but I never committed. Commitment would have moved me from a general acknowledgment of WalMart's worth to a serious plan to invest.

Christian faith must move beyond conviction *about* God to commitment *to* Him. Faith is investing everything a person is and has with God.

Faith that begins with conviction and moves to commitment results in response. That is, doing something about it. Action. Living accordingly. It's marrying the person, driving across the bridge, buying the stock, doing what God says.

Some may say, "I don't get all these distinctions. To me it's all one thing. Faith is believing in God, committing to God, responding to God. It's all the same." Good enough! Because they are all wrapped up together.

Important Questions About Faith

Actually, faith is one of the most controversial and puzzling aspects of Christianity and frequently leads to certain questions.

Question #1: Is faith really important?

According to Hebrews 11:6 it is: "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

As far as a relationship with God is concerned, faith is Number One in importance. It is the *only* way for a person to connect to God.

Question #2: If I have faith, can I get what I want? Maybe.

If you have faith, you can get what you want if that's the same as what God wants and said He would do.

Many people think they can get rich, be cured of cancer, or change another person's behavior if they have enough faith. That may be like plugging a refrigerator

into an electrical outlet and expecting it to wash your clothes.

Remember—faith is believing something will do what it is supposed to do. God never promised He would make every Christian rich or healthy or solve all our problems. God is not a genie in some Aladdin’s lamp that is rubbed with faith and made to do whatever we please.

Faith is believing and acting on God’s promises, which range from grace sufficient to face any problem to peace through any stress. God has given us a Book full of supernatural promises. Faith is our way to plug into those promises and see them come true in our experience.

Question #3: What about the healings and miracles in the Bible that are connected with faith? How did that work?

Indeed they were connected with faith. Just as healings and miracles are connected to faith today.

Faith is asking God to do what He promises and trusting Him to do it. But God does not promise routine miracles or guarantee routine healings. He does, however, promise to provide what is best, to meet our needs, to show His power, and to make everything work together for good. He consistently does all of these things, but He does them in different ways for different people in different instances. Faith is believing He keeps His word through multiple means. Sometimes that has involved healings or miracles. At other times it has not.

Christians in seemingly similar circumstances have extremely contrasting experiences. Some trust God and are healed; some trust God and suffer and die. Which do you think takes greater faith—seeing the power and love of God in miraculous healing or seeing the power and love of God in miserable suffering? I believe that both take great faith.

Question #4: Do some people have more faith than others?

Yes, they do. It is difficult to understand this, but the Bible teaches that God gives the spiritual gift of special faith to some but not all (1 Corinthians 12:9).

Think of it this way. Have you bought an extension cord lately? I had to shop for one last December after someone ran over our fifty-foot electrical cord to the outdoor Christmas lights with a snowblower. At the local discount store I found plenty to choose from. Some were long. Some were short. Some were for indoors and some were for outdoors. Some could carry a lot more electricity a lot farther than others. But every one was designed to connect to a lot of power—at least 110 volts of it.

In much the same way, we are varied in our faith. Some of us are designed for more and others are de-

signed for less. Some are for short distances and others are for very long distances. Some of us have to have faith for one circumstance, some for another. No matter which describes us, most of us have never carried a fraction of the faith that God designed us to carry. But every one of us is able to connect directly to God. And God is infinitely more powerful than 110 volts.

Let us worry less about how our faith compares to someone else’s and focus on the stunning privilege of living by faith—plugged into God, believing God, getting our power for life from God.

Question #5: What is an example of living by faith?

Ephesians 6:12 reveals that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

Do you believe that? Do you believe that your present struggles in life are mostly a spiritual war against Satan and evil and not primarily a struggle with your boss or a family member? That’s what God’s Word says. It takes faith to believe that because it’s hard to prove. If it’s true, our only chance of winning in life is to hook up to the power of God and expect Him to supernaturally beat off evil and bring good. If it’s not true, we’re crazy to pray and lazy to expect God to solve our problems.

Another example. You need a job. Or you are sick. Or you are worried sick about your son’s drug use. You’ve done everything you know to do about the situation—so it’s not that you’ve been irresponsible. But there is nothing more that you can do. Will you trust God to handle the situation and believe that He is doing what is right regardless of how it comes out? That’s faith. It’s trusting God and being convinced that whatever He does will be good and right.

Remember, our faith is in God, not in the process or the outcome. Philippians 1:29 gives another hard example: “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.” We do not seek or choose suffering, and many of us don’t suffer a great deal. However, the test of our concept of faith is clearer in a negative experience. If our definition of faith only works for experiences that are easy and pleasant, we have an inadequate understanding of faith.

Not all examples of faith are tough. In most of life, in fact, many of the examples are very pleasant, for “every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father” (James 1:17).

God is good and generous; His gifts are fantastic.

Remember, our faith is in God, not in the process or the outcome.

He just pours it on and on. But we shouldn't value faith for the good we can get. Value faith for the God it connects us to.

Those who value faith look for every opportunity to trust God. When the bills come. In school. On a first date. When laid off. At the hospital. While meeting an old friend. Every situation in life—whether good or bad—is a great new opportunity to trust God, connect to God, plug into God, do it for God. Faith is seeing and experiencing God in everything.

Recently the Minnesota Department of Transportation launched a campaign to reduce accidents involving cars and motorcycles. Whenever cars collide with motorcycles, the driver of the motorcycle is almost always injured more severely than the driver of the car. And the driver of the car almost always says, "I didn't see the motorcycle!" This scenario has happened so frequently that the campaign was started with the slogan "START SEEING MOTORCYCLES!"

When the Minnesota license plate renewal forms are mailed out, the Department of Transportation includes an insert along with the registration form. The insert has a dot on the left side of the page, with instructions telling you to cover your left eye and look at the right side of the page. When you do, the dot disappears, even though it is still there. The point of the exercise is to teach drivers to be constantly on the lookout for motorcycles that are there but are often not seen. It works. I've noticed that there seem to be many more motorcycles on the road these days.

God is there, whether we see Him or not. Two people can look at the same page of history; one sees God and the other doesn't. But God is always there and always making a difference.

Faith is opening our eyes to God. Those who value faith practice looking around more than those who don't value faith. Suddenly there is the startling discovery that the image and actions of God are visible in people, events, places, and things that previously seemed godless. Faith is seeing God.

START SEEING GOD!

Questions

For Thought:

1. What part does faith play in your life when your prayers—for healing, for saving a marriage, for a loved one's salvation—are not answered the way you want them to be?
2. Think about this statement: "Those who value faith look for every opportunity to trust God." When difficulties arise in your life, do you see them as an opportunity to trust God, or do you complain and

worry instead? Why?

3. Name at least one thing in your life that you are tempted to complain or worry about, and ask God to give you the faith to trust Him for the outcome. Are you excited that you have decided to exercise faith and trust God in your situation? Or are you uneasy about trusting God in this instance? Why?

For Discussion:

1. What are some situations in which a faulty understanding of faith can have damaging consequences?
2. Discuss some ways that we can open our eyes to God. Make a point this next week of looking for the image and action of God in people, places, events, and things. Be prepared next time to share with the group a few ways that you have discovered God where you might have missed Him before.
3. If I have faith, can I get what I want? What should be our response when we don't get what we want?
4. Why do some people have more faith than others?

This transcript is an excerpt from Leith's book *Winning the Values War*. For a copy of the book, available only through Wooddale Church, please call 1-800-MATTERS or mail your request to Faith Matters, 6630 Shady Oak Rd., Eden Prairie, MN 55344. A suggested donation for this book is \$20, and please indicate your request for *Winning the Values War*. The book may also be purchased through the Wooddale Bookstore and you may link to the bookstore through the www.wooddale.org web site.

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