

The Anatomy of Faith

Hebrews 11:8-19

Last week we considered the reality that our God wants relationship, not mere religiosity. So much of what is done on earth in the name of religion is man-made. The scribes and Pharisees, with their endless rules and regulations, are still among us. What God desires is to be in a genuine relationship with His people, one based on faith, hope, and love. This morning, let's consider the first of these three precious attributes, faith. First, I want to discuss what faith is not.

Faith is not, as a schoolboy once said, "believing what you know isn't true." The Bible encourages us to develop our faith, to nourish it, and to strengthen it. The disciples asked the Lord to increase their faith. In fact, the Scriptures tell us that "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb. 11:6). So faith is not a matter of believing that which we know to be untrue. That would only be a fools way to live.

Faith is not gullibility. P. T. Barnum, inventor of the circus sideshow, said that "there is a sucker born every minute." That may be true, but he or she is no sucker who believes in Christ. There is nothing praiseworthy about being "taken in" by religious hucksters who extort money from gullible people with their fantastic claims. We need to look directly to Christ who said, "I am the way, the *truth*, and the life" (Jn. 14:6).

Finally, faith is not blindly believing in something while we suspend our intellect and put our mind on hold. That doesn't please the Lord. He gave us our mind. The mind is at the core of what the Bible calls the human heart. Mindlessness should never be encouraged in anyone. Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your *mind*" (Matt. 22:37). "If our faith cannot hold up under rigorous intellectual examination, then it is nothing more than superstition" (Victor Shepherd). Christian faith does hold up!

God's Word is full of examples of people who have exemplified real faith, and they help us define and understand the anatomy of faith. So how do we define faith in God? Well, we could say that genuine faith may be defined as:

- Believing that there will be a fulfillment of those things that are told us by the Lord (Luke 1:45). The Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a prime example of this kind of faith. She was told by a messenger of God that something unprecedented was about to happen. She would be the mother of the Son of God – and it would happen by the power of the Spirit of God without the assistance of any mortal man. She believed the angel and experienced the fulfillment of the promise.
- Believing that it will be just as God told us (Acts 27:25). When the Apostle Paul was sailing to Rome near the end of his ministry, he received a message from an angel of God that they were about to be shipwrecked. The angel told Paul that the ship would be destroyed, but that none of the sailors would perish. The angel's exact words were, "God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you" (v. 24). What was Paul's response? He said, "So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me." The ship ran aground and was broken to pieces, but miraculously all hands were able to safely reach shore. They found themselves on the Isle of Malta.

- Being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see (Hebrews 11:1). In other words, faith involves a firm conviction based on past experience that God's Word is trustworthy.

I find no better example of faith in God than in the life of Abraham. He was confronted by God, the living God, the Creator of heaven and earth, a Being about whom little or no theology books had yet been written and no sermons had yet been preached.

Nevertheless, Abraham was able to discern something different about this God. He was not like the myriad idols that Abraham had been used to worshipping. Something about this God elicited faith and trust. And so, as we examine the life of Abraham we see that he trusted in God's intentions, he believed in God's promises, he trusted in God's provision, and he believed in God's power.

First, he trusted in God's intentions (Gen. 12:1-4). It all started when the Lord told Abraham to pack up all his belongings and his family, and to leave his country. He was to go to a land that the Lord would show him, and in this land the Lord God would make Abraham into a great nation. Abraham wasn't told everything in advance. He was simply to trust God's intentions and move out. This is what Abraham did. It was as if he anticipated what the Lord would later say through the prophet Jeremiah: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (29:11).

Are we, today, willing to trust in God's intentions and in His plans for us? Are we willing, like Abraham, to move out in faith? Or do we have to have it all laid out for us in advance before we will move? That's not faith!

Real faith is willing to embark on a venture with God. Faith is life ventured under God. And this is precisely where some people recoil. As Victor Shepherd so aptly puts it:

"Venture is the last thing they want. They want to establish a corner of life that they feel to be safe and secure, and then freeze it, preserve it, hang on to it, protect it. Understandable as this is, however, to do this is simply to put in time until the undertaker closes the lid and the pastor drops the handful of earth."

Abraham moved out of his comfort zone and followed the Lord into a land that he knew not. We need to remember his example as we move into a future that so often seems shrouded in mystery and uncertainty.

Second, he believed in God's promises (Gen. 15:1-6). After Abraham had moved out and settled in the land of Canaan the Lord God told Abraham, who was now seventy-five years old and still childless, to look into the heavens and try to count the stars. Then He said to Abraham, "So shall your offspring be!" (Gen. 15:5). Abraham believed the Lord, and the Lord credited his belief in God as righteousness. What a lesson there is here for us! When the promises of God seem wildly impossible, we need to pause and consider who it is who is making the promise. The God who is able to create universes and worlds is well able to keep His promises.

Third, he trusted in God's provision (Gen. 22:8). Twenty-five long years passed before God finally gave Abraham and Sarah a son named Isaac. This was the son through whom a great nation would come. All of Abraham's progeny were in the loins of Isaac. But one day, the Lord told Abraham to do something unthinkable. Take Isaac up Mount Moriah and sacrifice him! Surely this was the ultimate test that could be applied to Abraham's life and experience.

Abraham obeys! And as he and Isaac are scaling the mountain, collecting wood for the fire, Isaac asks, “Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham’s answer is breathtaking. “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” His words were prophetic, for even as he raised the knife to slay his son, an angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, “Do not lay a hand on the boy!” As Abraham looked up, there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. The Lord God had provided a substitute for Abraham’s one and only son.

Isn’t it more than interesting that what the Lord God did for Abraham on that hill, He would not do for himself years later when His One and Only Son, Christ the Lord, was sacrificed on the Cross for you and for me.

Fourth, he believed in God’s power (Heb. 11:19). We are told in Hebrews that when preparing to offer up Isaac, Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead. When we are in the midst of a situation in which all hope seems to have perished and we are in the valley of the shadow of death, we must be like Abraham. We must believe that our God can bring into being that which does not yet exist; that He can create anew! Indeed, our God is the One who says to us, “Behold, I am making everything new!” (Rev. 21:5).

Our friend, Abraham, sets for us an inspiring example. He trusted in God’s intentions; he believed in God’s promises; he trusted in God’s provision; and he believed in God’s power. This is the anatomy of faith. If we are to venture forth under God, then we must all be like Abraham. Let’s have none of this nonsense that he was special, superhuman, a hero. Abraham was fallible – as other episodes in his life demonstrate - but he was faithful. Others have discovered this God-given capacity for faith, and they have used it to embrace God, to follow Him, to serve Him, and ultimately to glorify Him. So can we! Let us all take courage from the inspiring examples of people like Mary, Paul, Abraham, and countless others who have blazed the faith-trail before us.

- Faith is not a leap in the dark; it is a leap out of darkness into the light. – David Reed
- God isn’t looking for great people, but He is looking for people who will realize the greatness of God. - Unknown
- Faith is like muscle which grows stronger with use, rather than rubber, which weakens when it is stretched. – J.O. Fraser
- Faith makes cash out of God’s cheques. – John R. Rice

Let us move from faith to faith and from victory to victory. This is our calling and destiny in Christ. Let Him, who is the object of our faith, lead the way.

Faith - Points to Ponder

Hebrews 11:8-19

A. Biblical Definitions of Faith:

- Believing there will be a fulfillment of those things that are told us by the Lord. – Luke 1:45
- Believing that it will be just as God told us. – Acts 27:25

- Not wavering at the promise of God, but being fully convinced that what God has promised He is able to perform. – Romans 4:20-24
- Considering Him faithful who has promised. – Hebrews 11:11
- Being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. – Hebrews 11:1

B. Faith as Seen in Abraham:

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| 1. He trusted in God's intentions | - | Gen. 12:1-4 |
| 2. He believed in God's promises | - | Gen. 15:1-6 |
| 3. He trusted in God's provision | - | Gen. 22:8 |
| 4. He believed in God's power | - | Heb. 11:19 |

C. Inspiring Thoughts on Faith:

- Faith is not a leap in the dark; it is a leap out of darkness into the light. – David Reed
- God isn't looking for great people, but He is looking for people who will realize the greatness of God. - Unknown
- Faith is like muscle which grows stronger with use, rather than rubber, which weakens when it is stretched. – J.O. Fraser
- Faith makes cash out of God's cheques. – John R. Rice