

The Fruit of the Spirit is Faith

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Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“I have faith! Help my lack of faith!” (Mark 9:24).

“The fruit of the Spirit is...faith(fulness)” (Gal 5:23).

THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

Teresa of Calcutta, known affectionately by the world over as Mother Teresa, spent half a century tending to the poor far from her homeland. Yet in letters published only after her death, she speaks of decades filled with “dryness”, “darkness”, even “torture.”

“Jesus has a very special love for you” wrote Teresa to a spiritual confidant; “As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear. The tongue moves [in prayer] but does not speak.”¹

St. John of the Cross even coined a phrase for such emptiness in a Christian’s life: he called it “the dark night of the soul.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAITH

When Paul wrote a letter to a church he left behind in 1 Thessalonians, he states “when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. But Timothy has brought back pleasant news about your faith...so in all distress and persecutions, we were encouraged to hear about your faith” (1 Thessalonians 3:2-6).

Faith is so very important. We most often define faith as that which we give to God. “Without faith,” declares Hebrews, “it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Hebrews 11:6). To the woman willing to touch the hem of his garment, Jesus declared to her “your faith has saved you” (Luke 7:50)! To God, we bring faith, and in return, he grants us pardon and gives us life.

¹ <https://time.com/4126238/mother-teresas-crisis-of-faith/>

FAITH, NOT FAITHFULNESS?

But wait. When Paul lists the fruit of the spirit—that which the Spirit provides to sanctified believers—he lists love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness...and *faith* (Galatians 5:22-23). As a child, I memorized that verse as “faithfulness.” But the Greek word is *pistis*. The same word used when we read that “without faith it is impossible to please him.” The same word used to declare “your faith has made you well.”

In Romans 12:3, Paul writes to Christians and says to them: “I say to every one of you: do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the *faith* God has distributed among you.”

Does it seem odd to think of faith as something God gives? Maybe you and I find great problems with an extreme or hyper-Calvinism that teaches God has already decided who is going to be saved and lost, and if he wants you to be saved, he’ll give you faith, and if he doesn’t want you to be saved, then he doesn’t give you faith. And you would be right (in my judgment) to express concern over that! “God is not willing that any should perish, but that all would come to repentance” is in my Bible. That Christ tasted death not for our sins only but for the sins of the whole world is in my Bible too. So is this: “the Spirit says, ‘Come.’ Whosoever will. Come and take of the water of life freely.” No...My God wants everyone. You know that. And I know that.

But I want all the Bible, don’t you? I want every truth, even if someone in another group has been saying it louder than we have for a while. If it’s true, why not claim it?? So I want to affirm two things. One is that God wants us all to be saved, and that we need to accept his free gift. That’s us bringing “faith” to the table. That’s Hebrews 11:6. That’s right.

But I also read that for those listening to the message, and wanting it, or wanting to want it, or wanting to want to want it, the Lord “opened their heart.” Like Lydia. I read that anyone who comes to faith has been brought there by Jesus Christ—either directly or indirectly. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God (Rom 10:17). That verse is usually offered to say “you have to read your Bible and do what it says if you want God to save you.” But back up a bit. God wrote that Bible in the first place! God spoke, God acted. God is the initiator. If anyone shows faith, you can credit God for it somehow.

And “faith” is used in lots of different senses in the Bible. It can mean more than one thing. “Grace” is like that too. Over in Ephesians 4:7. Paul talks about how each of us

has been given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Isn’t Christ’s gift for all? Of course. But he also gifts his people in different ways. You can call those gifts “graces.” He has graced Steve with a much more extroverted personality than he has graced me. But He loves us both and uses us in different ways. There may be initial graces and mature graces. There may be something small at first, but larger later. There may be something simple on the front end, but more complex after years of the Spirit at work.

That might help us with this verse in Romans 12. It says that God gives “faith”, and he gives it in different measure. Over in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul says there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. To each is given a manifestation or a gift. And one of the gifts listed there in 1 Corinthians 12:9...is faith.

If we take Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Galatians 5 seriously, we have to admit that faith is something God gives through his Spirit to believers. There shouldn’t be a question of if God does it. We should spend some time thinking about what that means for us.

A DEEPER FAITH THAT SUSTAINS

Last weekend, Katie and I attended the 70th anniversary dinner for Art and Sally Wells. 70 years ago, they looked each other in the eye and said, “I do.” Now, when they attend a wedding and watch two 20-somethings look at each other to say “I do,” they probably think to themselves, “you don’t have a clue.” Oh they mean it. Of course they mean it. But when Art and Sally Wells look at each other 70 years later and say “I do,” it means something so much deeper, so much richer, it doesn’t even seem like the same thing that was spoken 70 years prior. The love they have for each other was present in a teacup back then, but its now deeply rooted with a relationship as strong as a mighty oak now.

I read the hall of faith in Hebrews 13, learn that by faith cities were conquered, lives were changed, and nations were healed. I read of Abraham and Moses and Jesus...and I shudder as I realize...I don’t have what they’ve got. What I brought to God as a pre-teen when I decided to put on Jesus is not described in that chapter at all.

Maybe sincere reflection on what I don’t have, so desperately want, and Jesus obviously wants to provide, could lead me to say with the apostles, “Lord, increase my faith.” Because I sure do lack.

I understand why the apostles acted the way they did. “If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed” declared the Master, “you will say to this mountain ‘Move from here to here’, and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you” (Matthew 17:20).

Maybe they wanted to do great magic tricks; maybe they wanted power and prestige. I wouldn’t rule out either of those motives from what I know about these men. But maybe, just maybe, sincere reflection on what I don’t have, so desperately want, and Jesus obviously wants to provide, could lead me to say with the apostles, “Lord, increase my faith” (Luke 17:5). Because I sure do lack.

As his boy lay dying, the man knows the healer. He bears his soul to the Master. “If you can, I know my boy will be healed.” “If YOU can” replies Jesus, “All things are possible to him who believes” (Mark 9:22-24). Listen to the cry of the heart—perhaps the sound coming from deep without your own soul: “Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief!” I have faith! But I’m running on empty. And I need to believe”.

Let this point sink deep into your ears, and do not forget it: by the grace of a merciful God, in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, through the power of the Spirit of God, your faith can be renewed. God will take your faith that has waned and give you back a faith that sustains.

It is right for Christians to pray for faith. Deeper, richer faith. Fuller, stronger faith. A faith that can move mountains. A faith that will survive shootings, and heart-attacks, the loss of a child, and the end of the world. Oh God, give your people faith.

The End.