

Title: I Live By Faith
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Text: Galatians 2:20
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I Live by Faith

[Proposition: The life of a Christian is shaped by the cross, and therefore must be lived out through deep trust in who God is and what Christ has done for us.]

It was a mess, and stress, of my own making. Two months ago I was declared the legal guardian for my mother who is incapacitated and lives in a nursing home. Honestly, I get so much mail about my mom that I don't always open everything, often setting it aside for "later." In this case, later didn't come until a Friday after 7pm when I checked my voicemail and heard that two important documents were due back to the attorney and then to the court no later than the following Monday. I didn't know how detailed the documents needed to be, and I didn't have any information no matter how basic, that it was asking for. I didn't even know where the documents were at first. So, even when I found them, I still had to wait out the weekend before I could get the info and help that I needed—and hopefully get everything sorted out correctly and quickly.

Not a very good first effort for someone who's been declared a legal guardian.

My heart and mind started into an anxiety and anger downward spiral. If I was more in touch with my mom's care I would know this information. If I were a better son, I would visit more, and I wouldn't feel so awkward about it when I was there. There's no one to be frustrated with except myself, and it all could have been avoided—any idiot knows to open mail from his attorney. And don't forget our new baby makes seven children, even my best days I know I don't have the skills or knowledge or energy to do everything that needs to be done... and on it goes.

What was happening is that it was becoming painfully obvious (again) that place where I'm really trying to draw your life is in my own competency and ability. I was feeling not only its emptiness but its brokenness—it was actually sucking the life right out of me.

Maybe you have different struggles, different broken cisterns, but what do you do when you just feel like a fraud or a hypocrite. How do you turn from them and find life in God?

That's what we're going to talk about this weekend as we reflect together on this verse from Galatians 2:20. I want to talk about how to live by faith, how to draw water from God the fountain of living waters, and along the way we'll do a sort of case study in how I worked through these anxieties.

First,

I. The life we are called to is shaped by the cross.

A. A life shaped by the cross is not easy.

If you're like me, part of the difficulty of finding your source of life in Christ is how much you are inclined to find life in the here and now. When you hear Paul's words, "the life I live in the body I live by faith in the son of God" what is the "life" you picture?

Is it a life of smooth sailing, success, security, and immediate satisfaction? Picture in your mind the "good life" and compare it Paul's description of his own life in 2 Corinthians 2:24-28

24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 28 And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

That sounds like a pretty powerful outward expression of the spiritual reality that Paul calls “being crucified with Christ.”

I’m not suggesting we all will or should live a life exactly like Paul’s—but Jesus did call his disciples to “take up their cross and follow” him and he did promise that in seeking to save our lives we would lose them, but in losing them down for his sake we would find them.

B. God promises to be the source of life for us in the cross shaped life, not one of our own making.

And I am wondering, if part of the reason we struggle to tap into the reality of faith—that “Christ lives in me”—is not only because we turn to other people and things to be for us what only Christ can and should be—and also because we really don’t want to take up our cross, and we do all we can to avoid suffering. In other words, maybe the life we’re trying to live isn’t one God is interested in empowering?

Illustration:

To return to me and my story, another component of my idolatry is what we’re talking about here. It’s not only that I rely on my own competencies and abilities as the source for my life—but at some level I also basically expect my life to go as I plan or at least in a way that doesn’t cause me stress, anxiety, or pain. I’m constantly telling myself when we get through this week, or season, or this issue, or this thing—then I’ll have rest or peace or joy.

First of all, it will never happen in this life that I get on the other side of it—there is always something else coming. We live in a broken world full of sinners just like us, so it’s unreasonable to expect life to always go how I expect. It’s like expecting a home with seven children (most of them boys) to always be peaceful, quiet, and calm. That’s spitting in the wind.

But, more importantly, God means to teach us to rely not on ourselves but on him. In fact, God the Son called us to a life of self-denial for his sake—and in that life promises to sustain us. We can’t opt out of the life he calls us to and expect him to be the source of life for us as we go our own way.

So I have to identify my idols (self-reliance) as well as my expectations (everything goes my way), and then turn from them in my heart and mind and come back to Christ as my source of life.

To tap into real spiritual life I have to both turn *from* my idols and false expectations, and turn *to* God as he offers himself in the Gospel. That means you have to preach the Gospel to yourself, because

II. Christ is our source of life through the Gospel.

A. The Events and Effects of the Gospel.

In the Bible, the word Gospel can refer to the events of the Gospel: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, or the effect(s) of the Gospel: God has accomplished salvation through the Gospel and now showers us with blessings through faith in Christ: blessings such as justification, sanctification, adoption, the Spirit's indwelling presence, the promise of the New Heaven and New Earth, and much more beside.

Notice how Paul says in our verse that he lives by faith in "the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." In those phrases Paul points us to, or describes in one way, the Gospel. Jesus has done something for me as the Son of God, that I could never do for myself, because he loved me, he gave himself for me. Specifically, Paul says Jesus gave himself for our sins and to deliver us from the present evil age (Gal 1:3-4). Each of those elements could be meditated on individually and spiritual life can be drawn from each of them.

B. Two approaches to preaching the Gospel to yourself.

Preaching the Gospel to yourself is the process of reminding yourself of all that God offers you through Christ Jesus: all he has accomplished and all he gives you in Christ. I think you can do this in both directions, from the truths of the Gospel back to my own heart and life, or from my heart and life up to the Gospel.

1. Work back from the Gospel to my need.

To take my example again, to go from the Gospel back to my heart would be perhaps to say to myself: God means to give me more than a life I am competent to manage, he promises that I've been adopted into his family and his Spirit is in me (Gal 4:4-7), Jesus will never leave me or forsake me (Matt 28:20), and God is purifying me through the blood of Jesus to serve him (Heb 9:14). These are things I need to hear, my family here on earth is broken and in many ways over the last 18 years could not be for me what I needed or wanted, but God is a perfect and faithful Father. I'm my mom's legal guardian but Jesus is my guardian he has all authority on heaven and earth and promises to never leave me figuring out my life on my own. I'm a work in progress, and God isn't done with me, but he is changing me so I can serve him more faithfully. Any feelings I have to the contrary are false, and with God's help I need to turn from them to cling to Christ.

2. Work from my need to the Gospel.

And you can go the other way as well. Having examined your heart as best you can, and recognized the broken cisterns and false expectations, you can turn to God and remember the blessings you have in the Gospel that specifically relate to what you're struggling with. There is something specific you are looking for or hoping for in the specific idols you rely on and cisterns you dig. Often what you're looking for deep down is a good desire that has gotten twisted because of the effects of sin, so meditating on how the benefits of Christ meet that deep need is another way of preaching the Gospel to yourself.

Earlier, I identified my own competency or ability as a broken cistern from which I seek life. I've recognized that, and repented of it, I desire to find life in God not in me. How does the Gospel meet that need for me? There are numerous verses I could turn to just in the letter we've been looking at, but one that cuts to my heart is Ephesians 2:8-10

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

I want to perform well enough to find peace—but it is by grace I've been saved, it's not my own doing. I didn't initiate or in anyway contribute to God loving me and Jesus accomplishing salvation for me. Whether I totally bungled the situation with my mom or I was perfectly competent and conscientious--He accepts me, indeed seeks me, and I don't have to perform for him. Even as I fight anxiety and stress with the truth of the Gospel and my spirit adds that extra layer of anxiety that asks "Will I be able to keep fighting the fight of faith?" He says "by grace you have been saved" and I'm comforted and my spirit lifts.

C. To preach the Gospel to yourself it helps to develop some level of Gospel fluency.

Put simply, we have to do whatever we can to develop an understanding of the fullness of the Gospel: all that Jesus accomplished, all he gives to us, and all he promises to bring to pass. The gospel is like a beautiful diamond with many facets in it's surface, and as the light hits those facets it reflects and refracts in different ways. So, read the Scriptures (and get acquainted with a concordance or just Biblegateway.com), be consistent in worship so you hear Gospel preaching, take advantage of the classes we offer that dig deeper into the aspects of the Gospel, so you can store up the word of God in your heart and are ready to call to mind the blessings of the Gospel.

It's important to form this habit when things are going well, or at least not completely falling apart. There's a reason we put the hurricane shutters on the windows before the storm arrives, it's a much wiser course of action. In the same way, we must form that habit which will be the spiritual infrastructure that helps us trust in Christ as our source of life even when the storm comes.

Illustration:

In one of his sermons the 19th century preacher Charles Spurgeon said:

Oh, there is, in contemplating Christ, a balm for every wound! In musing on the Father, there is a quietus for every grief and in the influence of the Holy Spirit there is a balsam for every sore. Would you lose your sorrows? Would you drown your cares? Then go plunge yourself in the Godhead's deepest sea—be lost in His immensity. And you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated. I know nothing which can so comfort the soul, so calm

the swelling billows of grief and sorrow—so speak peace to the winds of trial—as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead.¹

In repentance we are taking note of our wounds including the self-inflicted wounds of sin, and in preaching the Gospel to ourselves we are seeking to apply the balm of Christ: all he is, has done, and promises.

III. The life we find in Christ is ours through faith in Him.

Really quickly I want to point out three things about faith that will be helpful in preaching the Gospel to yourself, and to help you keep fighting the fight of faith.

A. Trust is relational.

It is not just what you believe, but who you trust. The word “faith” here can have multiple senses depending on the context. Here in Galatians 2 Paul is talking about faith as trust, specifically trusting in the Person Jesus Christ rather than my own works. When we preach the Gospel to ourselves we are doing so in the presence of God—he is there with us in the fight. When we trust *Christ*, that is when we begin to experience Christ as the source of life, or as Paul says “Christ who lives in me.”

B. Trust is not only relational, but intentional

Trust is also an act of the will. It is clear from the context Paul is describing faith (trust) in Christ’s death and resurrection as an alternative to self-reliance. What I’m trying to draw out is that you have to choose between those options, you have to “put your trust” in Jesus. It doesn’t just happen automatically, in fact self-reliance comes naturally, idolatry comes naturally—so you have to make the conscious effort and decision to continually “put your trust” in him.

When my daughter stands on the edge of the pool thinking about jumping in, she’s not having a mental debate, she choosing whether to trust her own ability (or inability) or my promise to catch her.

C. Trust is not only intentional, it must be habitual.²

¹ Charles Spurgeon, “The Immutability of God,” available at <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-immutability-of-god#flipbook/>

² We form the habit, which becomes a spiritual reflex by spending time reading and meditating on the Bible, prayer, gathered worship, and the other spiritual disciplines—what we’ve called the Ancient Paths in other sermon series which you can find on our website. But perhaps an under appreciated way to help us develop this habitual way of trusting God as the source of life is what John Piper calls “Wielding the world in the fight for joy.” He means training yourself to see earthly joys and experiences as blessings from God and tangible expressions of the spiritual life you have in God.

A few years ago I was asked to do the music for one of my closest friend’s wedding. The evening before when we went out for the rehearsal dinner, I was also asked to pray for the meal. And what popped into my head at that moment was Revelation 19 the marriage supper of the Lamb. As I prayed I was asking God to help us enjoy all that was about to happen over the next few days as a small foretaste of the greater reality to come. I was asking God that as we ate, celebrated, and shared in the love of my friend and his bride it would help us find our life in him even as we long for his coming. What if you we took that approach to all of the blessings in our lives and began to train ourselves to see every earthly thing which gives us life, joy, or peace as a mere appetizer to the fullness which is to come?

Preaching the Gospel to yourself and is not always instantaneous or easy. You don't do it once and all my problems and idols go away and I'm skipping through the rest of my life with the spiritual warm fuzzies. Paul's life was ongoing which implies his faith/trust was too.

You have to go on trusting over time, forming the habit through spiritual disciplines of putting our trust in God so you can find our life in God.

I already alluded to it above, but for me the struggle with trusting my own ability in the situations of my life is an ongoing thing. And sometimes, when I call to mind the truth of the Gospel it doesn't instantaneously alleviate my spiritual anxiety, or sometimes it does but it seems to fade quickly. So you also have to go on trusting in the moment when you are preaching the Gospel to yourself and choosing to put your trust in Christ.

Illustration/Application:

When we have a cold winter morning here, my office often stays cold all day. The rest of the building gradually warms up, but my office never really does. I have a little space heater, but sometimes I'll just go stand in the parking lot in the warm sun. Sometimes I immediately feel better, but sometimes I have to linger there, holding my place until the sun does it's work.

Preaching the Gospel to yourself is sometimes like that. You have to hold the Gospel truth in your mind, or journal it out, repeat it to yourself, recite a key verse it when you are tempted or anxious, plead with God to help you believe and experience the blessings of the Gospel that you are calling to mind. Find your way to linger there and let the warmth of the Gospel warm your heart.

Conclusion:

In the end we got all the paperwork sorted out, but I know when the phone rings again from the nursing home, some of those anxieties are going come flooding back in. The idol of self-reliance runs deep.

I'll have to keep preaching the Gospel to myself, asking God to help me, and choosing to put my trust in him. And I know I'll do it imperfectly, and so will you as you fight your fight of faith. But keep preaching to yourself, keep trusting, however imperfectly—and remember it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not of your doing.