

Lessons Learned
How “Faith” Can Mess Up Your Life
August 24, 2014

PRELUDE – Come People of the Risen King

Your Love Never Fails / Christ is Rise

Can Anybody Hear Me (Andrews)

Good morning everyone.

That’s kind of a lonely place to be, isn’t it? When it feels like God is far away from us ... when it feels like God is not hearing us.

If you’ve had any experience at all with God in your life – whether you’re a long-term committed follower of Jesus or you’ve merely “dabbled in the faith” from time to time, I’m sure that feeling has been part of it. In fact, I’m so sure of it that I decided to talk about it in this short three-week series which I’m calling “Lessons Learned.”

(And just so you’ll know, there’s really no connection between the topics in this series other than the fact that these are things that God seems to be teaching and impressing on me in recent days. And, so, I figured that since I’m your pastor it might be worth sharing them with you).

In any case, today I want to talk to you about those times when it feels like “God isn’t there” specifically because it seems like God hasn’t kept His promises or hasn’t done what we’ve asked Him to do. And I’m not talking about praying to win the lottery and then it not happening. I’m talking about ...

- Asking God to give us a job or spouse or a child ... and it doesn’t happen.
- Asking God to heal a friend or a loved one or maybe even us – and if not that, to at least ease the pain and suffering – but He doesn’t.
- Praying that God would intervene in a situation that seems hopeless – but nothing changes.
- I’m talking about praying that God would deliver a friend or a loved one from addiction or destructive habits and draw them to Himself – and yet they continue on the road to ruin.
- I’m talking about asking God to protect someone from an addicted or destructive person – and something bad or even tragic still happens.

All of those are reasonable requests. All are in line with the revealed heart of God in the scriptures. All are good things that God says he wants for those who belong to him in Christ. And all of them are *potentially destructive to our faith* when they don’t turn out the way that we ask ... which is why, as your pastor, I want to talk to you about this – and with some urgency because I fear for some of you.

Actually, I fear for *all* of you (and myself as well) because as long as we live in this sin-cursed world; as long as there is still an enemy of our souls and his demonic powers and principalities remain at work in this world; there is going to be disappointment with God and the action (or inaction) of God. And disappointment, if it’s not handled correctly can eventually become discouragement and disillusionment to the point where we just throw up our hands and say, “that’s it, I’m done – done with Christ – done with church” and we check out.

I’ve seen that happen to people so many times over the years that I’ve lost count. I saw it in my own family many years ago as a

teenager when my mother's mother – one of the most godly women ever – had a stroke and lived out her final years as a mere shell of her former self. And every one of her kids concluded “if that's what faith in Christ gets you, then why bother?” It was that devastating to their faith.

And because this happens so often, over the years I've talked about how to handle disappointment with God quite a bit. In fact, right about this time of the year three years ago, I did an entire series on it. I called it “Living With Your Losses.” It was probably one of the best and most useful series I've ever done.

In fact, it was so useful that two weeks ago, I took a Thursday and a Friday afternoon and went up to Smithville Lake and listened to the whole thing. I preached to myself (which was kind of weird, I'll admit) but I needed to because, in recent days, I've experienced several disappointments. None of them individually were that huge – well, one of them was – but collectively, they were doing a number on me. I was angry all the time; I wasn't motivated or excited about the future; my eating was totally out of control.

And so, I needed to deal with these issues – those disappointments – in a biblical process called “lamenting” which is what that series was about. And I would strongly recommend that some of you do the same thing. Listen to the series – again, it was called “Living with Your Losses” from August 2011. You can find it in the media section of our website, in our library and also on our podcast. Take a couple of days, listen to it and do what it says. I promise – you'll detox your heart and soul in the process.

But that's not what I want to talk to you about this morning ... because, really, there are two issues when it comes to disappointment with God and your faith in God. One is dealing with it properly when it happens but *the other* – which we really need to talk about with some urgency – is a lack of clarity concerning faith itself: what it is, what we put it in and what it accomplishes.

As I've watched and observed people over the years (including myself) I've learned that ...

Most people have a too-narrow understanding of “faith” ... which leads to a too-narrow set of expectations ... which often leads to discouragement and disillusionment.

“Faith” – at least as many of us understand it – can really mess up your life.

So, this morning, obviously, I would like to *expand* your understanding of faith and expand your set of expectations in the hope that you will avoid unnecessary discouragement and disillusionment.

An Expanded Vision

But before I get into that, I need to tell you that I've been thinking about this issue for almost six months – how to lay this out and how to describe it to you.

It started last February when we did our annual movie series. You may remember that one of those movies was *Life of Pi* – which, by any measure, was a very strange cinematic experience. However, it *did* illustrate disappointment with God – and faith – very well because Pi had a faith that was based solely on his interpretation of the events of his life. When life was good, then he had faith that God was at work. When it wasn't, he didn't. And the emptiness of that approach made a pretty strong impression on me.

A few weeks later, I had a fascinating conversation with my three daughters. I think it was Easter weekend and all of them were in town. We were sitting on the back deck talking about ... faith ... and the experience of faith. One of my girls, who belongs to a very good sort-of-charismatic church (where there's a lot of talk about “believing God for this” or “believing God for that”), was talking about some exciting things that were happening there. But, she said, sometimes things *don't* happen and they wonder why.

- Was there some kind of demonic force at work?

- Some kind of sin that needed to be dealt with?
- Or ... did they just not have enough faith?

At the very same time, here at NHCC we were doing a series called “Please Convince Me” – which was one of those intellectual “why it makes sense to have faith” series that had *nothing whatsoever* to do with “believing God so that X can happen.” And between that and my daughter’s church experience and that silly *Life of Pi* movie, the seed of this message – and, actually, what will turn out to be an entire series on faith later this fall – came to me.

So I said to my girls (and I’m saying to you) that “there are three dimensions of faith in the Bible. And you need all three. But you need them in balance and in a certain order or you’re going to get really messed up.” I said, “It’s like a three-story house. You can’t have the third floor without the second and you can’t have the second without the first.”

“Unfortunately, what most people define as ‘faith’ in everyday life is what I would call the third floor. And that’s what they work on. That’s where they put their effort. They don’t work on the first or second floors too much. And when the storms of life come and beat against their house – when that top floor gets blown off – there’s not much under it and the whole thing falls apart.”

We’ll come back to that analogy in just a bit (Jesus actually said something very similar) but let me go ahead and briefly give you the three dimensions of faith that I’m talking about and then get specific about how your life can get messed up.

Faith has the power to affect three aspects of our lives: our condition before God, our character and (sometimes) our circumstances.

By “our condition before God” I mean that when we choose to believe in what God did in history through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth – that he was the savior of the world, atoning for sin – and receive him as our savior personally; when we put our faith in His good works instead of our good works, our condition in the sight of God goes through a radical change. Something spiritual and eternal takes place.

No longer are we dead in sin and headed for destruction; we are instantly made alive in Christ, forgiven of everything sin we’ve ever committed or will commit. And when Jesus returns, we will get to be part of the great renewal and restoration of this world. We will be changed from mortal to immortal and no longer subject to the curse of sin.

That’s why we say all the time around here that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. And not just “we” ... because this is a huge theological emphasis in the letters of the Apostles and the teaching of the early church fathers. It’s the core doctrine of Christianity and what distinguishes it from every other world religion or spiritual pathway.

But faith also has the power over time to change our character.

When we receive Christ, the Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit of God joins up with our spirit – actually, makes our spirit come to life – and then begins to transform us from the inside out as we *in faith* cooperate. In other words, as we learn what Jesus taught and modeled and believe that His way of thinking and living is better than our way of thinking and living – as we trust Him enough to actually *follow His leadership* – a remarkable transformation takes place. We start to look more like Him and less like ourselves in our attitudes and actions.

The Apostle Paul describes this transformation in very vivid terms when he writes:

The works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, depravity, idolatry, sorcery, hostilities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish rivalries, dissensions, factions, envying, murder, drunkenness, carousing, and similar things.

Galatians 5:19-21 (NET)

In other words, when people are left to their own way of living without any openness to God, that’s the kind of stuff they’ll do.

But when we have faith that the way of Jesus is better and start following Him, the Spirit of God begins to produce fruit.

And the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Galatians 5:22-23 (NET)

Faith over time has the power to change our character. In fact, if it doesn't, it means there's a problem with our faith.

As the Apostle James once wrote:

*What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? Faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.
James 2:14,17 (NLT)*

Faith that produces a change in character is why there are so many instructions and exhortations and even warnings about attitudes and behaviors in the words of Jesus and in the writings of the Apostles. In fact, one of Paul's favorite tactics is to describe how God has changed our condition through faith in Christ in the first half of his letters and then, in the second half, to say, "therefore, live this way" because faith also affects your character. Along the same lines, one of Jesus favorite teaching methods was to say, "you've have heard it said that this is how you should live; but I say to you, do it this way."

For example, when I'm angry and I feel justified to hold a grudge and I learn that Jesus says "forgive as you have been forgiven" because I trust him – because I have faith – I try to forgive.

For example, when I hear the world say that contentment is found in having "more" but I learn that Jesus says "it's better to give than to receive" because I trust him – because I have faith – I rearrange my financial life so that I can give regularly and in proportion to my income.

So, faith has the power to affect our condition before God and it has the power to affect our character.

And, as I said earlier, it also has the power to affect our circumstances.

And this is clear primarily from the stories about Jesus and his ministry in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and, also, in the sensational stories of what happened in the first churches, as described in the Book of Acts.

For example, Matthew tells us the story of a woman who suffered from some kind of a bleeding problem for 12 years. The story says that she had faith that if she could just touch Jesus' robe, she would be healed. She did and she was.

And Jesus said to her...

"Daughter, be encouraged! Your faith has made you well." Matthew 9:22 (NLT)

On another occasion, Jesus was approached by a blind man named Bartimaeus who believed that Jesus could heal him. He began to shout out for Jesus to have mercy on him. The crowd tried to shut him up, but he persisted.

And then Jesus said...

"Go, your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road. Mark 10:52 (NIV)

Later in the NT, we read that Paul and Barnabas were in the town of Lystra and there was a man there who had been crippled from birth. He had never walked in his life.

Yet, the Bible says that ...

Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. Acts 14:9-10 (NIV)

In addition to the stories of how faith changed circumstances, there's a fair amount of teaching that goes along with it.

For example, Jesus once told his disciples ...

I assure you, even if you had faith as small as a mustard seed [at that time the mustard seed was the smallest seed known to humanity] you could say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it would move. Nothing would be impossible."

Matthew 17:20 (NLT)

On another occasion, he said ...

Anything is possible if a person believes. Mark 9:23 (NLT)

That's pretty strong.

And, on the flip side, Jesus was pretty down on people who didn't have faith.

Matthew writes:

Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue ... but he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith. Matthew 13:54,58 (NIV)

To put in terms we're using this morning, Jesus couldn't change their circumstances because they didn't have faith that He could. No one stepped out in faith like the woman who was bleeding or blind Bartimaeus. No one came and said, "Jesus, I believe you *can*. So, please, *will* you?"

Make no mistake about it: the Bible does teach that faith sometimes bring about the kind of Divine intervention that leaves people amazed.

Now, what I want to do at this point is to lay these three dimensions of faith side by side on a chart so you can see how they compare.

I won't go through the whole thing with you (I'll save it for the series later this fall) but just notice a couple of things. <brief comments>

Now, notice the line that says "activity." It's highlighted. It describes what faith looks like in action with that particular dimension of faith.

In the *condition-before-God-changing* dimension, we hear the Gospel – the good news of what Jesus did for us, we believe it and then we rest in it. We stop working to prove ourselves worthy and we stop worrying about our status before God. We sin, we fall short, we admit it and then we rejoice that, in Jesus, we are already forgiven. And we pick ourselves up and move on.

In the *character-changing* dimension of faith, we learn what Jesus says about how to live, we believe it – we trust his wisdom more than our own and more than the wisdom of this world – and we obey. We try to follow in His footsteps.

In the *circumstance-changing* dimension, we ask, we believe that God really can do whatever it is and then we wait until He does and we overcome whatever obstacle is in our way.

The Problem We Have

Now, as I said earlier, the purpose of this message is to illustrate how “faith” – at least, in the too-narrow way that most of us understand it can mess up your life. And so, I should define what I mean by “too narrow.”

And what I mean by it is that most of us think of “faith” primarily as it is described in the rightmost column – in the circumstance-changing dimension.

In other words, where most of us invest the greatest amount of energy is in asking God, believing that He can and then trying to hang on until He does.

Furthermore, most of us tend to judge ourselves and even God by what happens in that dimension. If God “comes through” then we conclude that we must be doing something right in the faith department. And we take it as evidence that He really does love us.

“God gave me a new job. God healed my sickness. God brought me a husband or a wife. God provided the money we needed. What a blessing! My faith really paid off! What a gracious and loving God we have!”

Now, please don't hear what I'm not saying. I'm not knocking any of that. When those kinds of things happen as a result of your praying and acting in faith, you *are* doing something right in the faith department and God *is* blessing you. He *is* expressing His lovingkindness towards you.

So, by all means, in all circumstances, you and I should come boldly to God's throne of grace and, in faith, ask for help, ask for what need, ask for the desires of our heart that are consistent with his character and will benefit His Kingdom.

But ... but ... when we come and we ask in faith, believing, and God says “no” – or God says “not yet” and we have to wait – what about that? That's where the problem comes, especially if that's where most of your faith-building energy is going. You're going to start hearing demonic whispers telling you two things that simply are not true.

1. “Your faith is lacking.”
2. “God doesn't really love you.”

Of course, you won't hear those things in the second person like that. You'll hear them as your own thoughts. “I guess my faith wasn't strong enough.” Or, “I guess God doesn't really love me like He does so many other people who He seems to be blessing.”

Ever heard those whispers? I have. But they're straight from the pit of hell because the truth is whenever God says “no” or “not yet, keep waiting” in response to our earnest prayers and requests, how can it be a judgment that our faith is lacking? We came and asked, didn't we? We knocked and kept on knocking as Jesus once put it. And we did so precisely because we *did* and *do* have faith! We believe that God could do something if He chose to.

So, stop believing that garbage about your faith in God's power being not enough!

Secondly, when God says “no” or “not yet, keep waiting” – and this is even more important to understand – it is *not* an assessment of how much He does or doesn't love us. I've seen so many people fall for this and get truly discouraged and disillusioned with God. And their faith collapses which breaks my heart because it's a lie. And some of you, this is where you are this morning. This is what you believe.

So, let's step back a bit from whatever the circumstance is that you're asking God in faith to change and let me ask you a question. What is the evidence that God really loves you? Is it that He answers your prayers? That He steps in and divinely intervenes in your current circumstances?

You know, I don't see much evidence of that in the Gospel. I don't see Jesus or Paul or any of the other disciples saying "if you want to measure how much you are loved, count your many blessings ... name them one by one."

What I do see is Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, speaking to his disciples and saying:

There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. John 15:13 (NLT)

And then, the next day, that's what he did. He showed them his love by going to the cross for them.

And not only did he do it for them – his friends – he did it for his enemies as well.

As Paul put it:

God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. Romans 5:8 (NLT)

While we were still opposed to God; while we were still untrusting of his character and his intentions toward us, Jesus – God in the flesh – in his lovingkindness overlooked all of that and did what no one else would do. He showed his amazing love for us by going to the cross – taking the penalty on to Himself; a penalty that you and I should rightfully bear for our sins.

Now, I'm not saying that things aren't more pleasant; that life isn't easier when God steps in and changes things in response to our faith. That is true. *But if He does not*, it is not a measure of his love for us. The cross is the measure of his love ... which is why it is so important that we build our faith in the first dimension – the dimension that changes our condition from spiritual death to life – that we ponder and soak and rest in God's amazing love and grace.

And we focus our energy on that dimension and the second dimension.

As the writer to the Hebrews puts it (to a group of people who were discouraged because God hadn't come through as they had hoped) ...

Do not throw away this confident trust in the Lord. Remember the great reward it brings you! Patient endurance is what you need now, so that you will continue to do God's will. Then you will receive all that he has promised. Hebrews 10:35-36 (NLT)

What the writer is saying here is fascinating. There's the promise of future reward that "yes, in the end, you will overcome. You will be delivered. You will be blessed. And all of these beyond measure – a great reward. God has something special in your future – you get to be part of the great redemption that is coming."

But ... until then ... *endure*. And continue to do what? *God's will*.

What he is saying is that, if the circumstance-changing dimension of faith doesn't work out as you hope, focus on your character-changing faith.

Conclusion

Friends, this is why it is so important that we have a holistic understanding of faith – that it's more than a narrow vision of "ask, believe and wait." That doesn't always work out in this world. But God will transform our character as we learn, believe and obey.

And even though that will never be complete in this world and we'll still fail in that, God will one day finish it because we have heard and believed and rested.

The bedrock of faith is what God has done in Christ. When all else fails in life, that's what you come back to. That's why you must continually remind yourself of it. That's why it's so valuable to know and be convinced that Jesus really lived and really died and, most importantly, rose again. That miracle is the guarantee that the ultimate miracle really will happen to you – because it's already happened to Jesus. In him, the new creation has already begun.

So don't quit, don't give up or give in. You really will win in the end.

Let's pray.

Feature – Overcomer

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. Small group rally

Interested in joining a small group or attending a class? See the insert in today's program that provides a list of all available classes and "open" groups at NHCC. Also, come to the Small Group Rally in the Commons today in between services. You will have an opportunity to meet teachers and small group leaders and sign up for a class or a group. Our fall small group season begins September 7th and ends November 22. Small group child care signup deadline is August 31 and is \$25 per child. Contact Nichole (nichole@northheartland.org) or Ladell (ladell@northheartland.org) for more information.

2. Golf tourney

Save the date for the NHCC "Every Child Matters" Golf Tournament scheduled for Friday, October 3 at Tiffany Greens. The tournament will raise funds for organizations supporting children in foster care/awaiting adoption. (Cost -\$75 per golfer or \$300 per team.) Information on the tournament and corporate sponsorship opportunities will be coming soon.

Endnotes