

**Toxic Faith**  
(Part I: Mixed-up Theology)  
***“Faith Can Fix Anything”***  
**January 16, 2011**

Good Morning everyone. As Ladell said, we are beginning a brand new series this morning and, before I jump into the topic for the day, I want to tell you why I decided to do this series.

As you can probably guess from the title “Toxic Faith,” this series comes from a perspective similar to the one we took in last fall’s “Detox” series: and that is that a lot of us have a kind of “poison” running through our heads and hearts that messes with our lives. “Detox” had to do with emotional poisons; this series has to do with theological or spiritual poisons – wrong beliefs about God and the practice of the

Christian life – which are just as dangerous (if not more so) because they typically lead us to expect things of God that God never promised. And whenever you get your expectations out of whack, it's not long until your life is also out of whack.

In fact, to get into the topic for today, some of you sitting here this morning are discouraged and maybe even angry at God because you believed that if you had enough faith or the right kind of faith, then things would “work out.” You’d get the job; your marriage would be saved; your kids would turn out right; the tumor would go away; you’d get pregnant and have children. But things have not worked out and now, your heart and your soul are out of whack. Your “faith” has actually become toxic to you.

Now, maybe that hasn't happened to you personally, but chances are you know

someone to whom it has. You know someone who has valiantly tried to have faith in a tough situation and it hasn't worked for them.

A few years ago, my parents celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. We wanted to do something nice for them, so we invited my mom's brothers and sisters and their spouses to meet us in D.C. for a surprise celebration at my parents' townhouse. It was a great evening and they were very honored.

But after a couple hours, when things kind of settled down, my mom and her siblings sat in a circle and began discussing what, for each of them, was probably one of the top three significant emotional events of their lives: the death of their mother in 1976. *30 years later* there was still a level of woundedness in them because my

grandmother had been a godly woman of faith. She had remained married and faithful to her husband even though he was an alcoholic. She pastored a small little congregation in her home.

Unfortunately, in the two years before she died, she developed hardening of the arteries which totally changed her personality and she became a shell of the person she once was. She lived with us for a year when I was a senior in high school and it was really sad to see how far she had fallen.

And that experience became a real spiritual crisis for my mom and her family: *why would God allow a person of such great faith – who had experienced many divine interventions in her life, seemingly as a result of that faith – to come to such a bitter end?* And, on that night 30 years later, it was

obvious they were *still* bothered by it. Maybe you can relate to that.

So what I want to do this morning is to take a look at where this belief comes from and, then, what the Bible really teaches about faith. And I think you can tell that my purpose in this is not to complete some kind of academic theological exercise, but to help us be delivered from a pseudo-faith that's poisoning a lot of us.

## **Where It Comes From**

So, here we go. Where do we get the idea that faith – if we just have enough of the right kind – can fix anything?

Well, honestly, I think we have to say that it comes from the Bible.

**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)*

Then, as if to show the reality of that, we read stories all over the gospels like this one in Matthew, that 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 Bartimæus 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)*

On the flip side, there are also passages in the Bible which warn against the lack of faith ...

### **The Apostle James tells us**

*If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all*



*without finding fault, and it will be given to you. James 1:5 (NIV)*

*But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. James 1:6-7 (NIV)*

**... which seems to echo what the writer of Hebrews says; that ...**

*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. Hebrews 11:6 (NIV)*

And then of course, we go back to Jesus

again; to what happened when he went to do ministry in his hometown.

*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)*

And that's just a small sampling of what the Bible has to say about faith and the power of faith. Obviously, it is a big deal and we need to have it.

Now, I know that some of you are probably thinking, "Wait a minute, Rick. It sounds like you're saying something different than what you originally said. These passages seem to *support* the idea that faith *does* cause big things to happen and a lack of faith has the opposite result."

Well, that's because they do and it does.

**The Bible *does* teach that faith *does* cause things to happen.**

And this reality is what's behind many books and preachers of what's known as the *Positive Confession* movement. Perhaps you've heard of it. Sometimes it's called the *Word-Faith* movement. Less positively, it's sometimes called the "name it and claim it" or "blab it and grab it" movement. The idea is that *if you believe it and then say it, you will get it – whatever "it" might be.*

"In faith," the teaching goes, "speak positive outcomes and they will happen."

Now, a lot of pastors kind of have a knee-jerk reaction to that and just kind of rag on that idea because one of its most visible spokespersons is Joel Osteen and sometimes Joel takes things to an extreme,

but there is truth to this. The Bible does teach that those of us in Christ are the Beloved; that we are favored by God, we are blessed by God and that our words and prayers do have power. That can't be minimized because we're a little wary of some flamboyant preacher from Texas.

## **If It Doesn't Work**

However ... and this is where the problem is ... the Bible has *other things* to say about faith and its power and if we neglect those things, we're going to be left – as one author puts it – with the impression that ...

God is checking to see just how much we believe before He decides whether or not to answer our prayers. Get rid of enough doubts, send out enough positive vibes, and God says "Go."

But until we reach that threshold God shrugs His shoulders and says, “Not good enough.”<sup>i</sup>

And if you live with that kind of mindset long enough – if you think that’s what God is doing and that’s why things aren’t working out for you, even though you have faith and you pray – then your faith is going to become toxic to you in at least one of three ways – if not all of them.<sup>ii</sup>

### **1. You may have to disconnect from reality.**

When you’ve prayed and prayed and prayed and the outcome is not positive, you’re probably going to have to ignore what’s really happening around you and pretend that it is.

Last spring, I came across a book by Larry Osborne, a pastor, who has a very sad

example of this in the very first chapter.

**It's called "10 Dumb Things Smart Christians Believe" ...**

... and, actually, four of the topics in this Toxic Faith series are addressed in his book, and we have it in our bookstore if you're interested.

Anyway, Osborne tells of a friend whose wife was in the final days of the final stages of cancer. This is what he wrote:

As we sat by her bed, wondering what to say and how to pray, I was stumped. (I'm a pastor and I'm supposed to know what to say in these situations.) But before I could say anything profound—or even trite—our awkward silence was broken by the entrance of Susan's husband, John, into the room.

We exchanged hugs and a quick greeting. Then John began to talk. He spoke of the plans he and Susan had for the future. Not in a regretful reflection of what could have been, but with a powerful conviction of what was yet to be.

It was weird.

Susan lay there barely cognizant, struggling for each breath, seemingly hours from death. Yet her husband stood inches away talking about future vacations, a kitchen remodel, and their retirement years as if the four of us were hanging out at a backyard barbeque.

Then [John] told us what had happened. That morning, while in prayer for Susan's healing, he'd been

overcome with a powerful sense of God's presence and a deep conviction that God had answered his prayer. As he continued to pray, biblical passages proclaiming God's protection and care flooded his mind. He felt as if God had physically reached down and touched him, whispering in his ear, "I've heard you. She'll be okay."

I didn't know what to say. Could it be that God was up to something big? Were we about to witness a miracle? Was John's faith going to pull her back from the jaws of death?

I wasn't so sure.

He was absolutely certain.

That night she breathed her last breath.



When reality doesn't line up with your faith, to keep your faith, you have to disconnect from reality. And that's not good. That's toxic.

Second, if God really is testing your faith to see how much and how well you believe before he says "yes", but things don't get better ...

## **2. You will probably end up wallowing in self-condemnation.**

You're going to think: "Wow, Jesus said that all it takes is faith the size of a mustard seed (the smallest known to man at the time of Jesus) and I don't even have that much! What a spiritual loser I must be. Or, maybe there is some sin I'm committing that I have no idea of. O God, please search my heart and show me if there be any wicked way in me and I will be happy to repent."

That's a second possible result when things don't get fixed by faith: self-condemnation – a terrible way for a follower of Jesus to live. We're not called to live that way. But I'm sure that some of us in this room have been down that road.

But the third potential result of this limited perspective on faith is even more terrible.

### **3. You might end up losing faith in God altogether.**

If you really believed – if you named it and claimed it and you spoke God's promises over a situation and you know you believed with all your heart and not an ounce of doubt—and yet God failed to fix the situation you were praying about or speaking about ...well, then, you're going to have to conclude that God is a liar; that God is unfaithful and the Bible is just a book of empty promises.

That's what happened to Larry Osborne's friend. He writes:

John was devastated. For years after Susan's death, he limped along spiritually, disillusioned with God, with prayer, and the impotence of faith.<sup>iii</sup>

*Disconnect with reality; condemn ourselves; or stop believing in God altogether* – logically, these are the only three choices if our primary understanding of “faith” is that it can fix anything ... and something we “believe for” doesn't get fixed.

## **What *Else* the Bible Says**

Fortunately, as I said before, the Bible has some other things to say about faith that give us a much broader and, I think, healthier perspective. And nowhere is that

perspective expressed as clearly as it is in the quintessential statement on faith in the New Testament: the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews.

Before I read it to you, let me set the background just a bit so you'll understand this. Following Jesus in the second half of the first century wasn't easy. In fact, it was illegal and some Christians were severely persecuted. Rome didn't have a Bill of Rights which included "freedom of religion" and, apparently, whatever group of people this letter was written to, they were having second thoughts about Christianity. Some had already decided that the price of believing in Christ was too high – things weren't working out as they hoped – so they "unconverted" back to Judaism.

And the purpose of the letter was to encourage those who were thinking about

following those folks to stay committed to Christ, a theme which comes up again and again in this letter.

**For example, here's the end of chapter 10:**

*Do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. We do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved. Hebrews 10:38-39 (NIV)*

**Then, chapter 11 begins with this verse ...**

*Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. Hebrews 11:1-2 (NIV)*

And it's amazing because, right after this

statement, for 31 verses, the writer lists person after person after person from the Old Testament – the “ancients” – and how they lived by faith, starting with the great patriarchs Abraham and Sarah and going all the way down to a Canaanite prostitute by the name of Rahab who helped the Israelites enter into the Promised Land.

And then, as if to hammer home the power of faith, the writer adds:

*What more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith ...*

*... conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the*

*flames, and escaped the edge of the sword;*

*... whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Hebrews 11:32-35 (NIV)*

Wow! It's pretty amazing what faith did for those people, isn't it! It almost sounds like this passage is saying that, because *they had faith*, things worked out just like they hoped. They gained what was promised.

It sounds like that because ... that's what happened to those people.

*However ... that's not the whole story. After recounting the amazing tales of people whose faith literally produced miracles, the writer tells about others whose faith*

produced ... well, you'll see.

*There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection [when Christ returns]. Some people [in faith] faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.*

*Some people of faith were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—*

*The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.*



## **And the amazing thing is that ...**

*These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. Hebrews 11:35-39 (NIV)*

In other words, *faith didn't fix anything* for these people, yet God considered them to be listed in His Hall of Fame of Faith. There was no rebuke for these people; no, from God, "sorry, but you're just a spiritual loser, friend. You didn't have enough of the right kind of faith, so I had to let them saw you in half."

Those who *didn't* receive what was promised were commended for being as faith-filled as those who did.

## **Conclusions**

And I think if you were going to make a list of the conclusions you could draw about “having faith” from this passage, that would have to be the first one.

**1. Even though you have great faith,  
sometimes you don't receive the promise.**

Sometimes, you ask God for things to work out, you believe that He can do that, and they do. Sometimes, you ask, and you believe that He can do that, and they don't.

And I have to tell you – the idea that “it didn't work out because you didn't have enough of the right kind of faith” – sometimes I just want to slap people who say or imply that.

Now, sometimes it *is* true – we don't have faith, so we don't pray, so we don't receive from God.

But listen to me – and I think some of you

really need to hear this today – when you have been praying your guts out to God – “I believe you can heal this; I believe you can do that” ... you *do* have faith and your faith is bigger than a mustard seed. The very fact that you would seriously turn to God in those moments is a sign that you do believe He can do something. That’s faith and don’t let anyone tell you it’s not just because things don’t work out. *Even though you have great faith, sometimes you don’t receive the promise.* That’s what the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews was trying to get across.

Of course, if that’s true, someone might question “so what good is faith then? Why even bother if sometimes it doesn’t work?”

The answer is in the second conclusion we can draw from the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Hebrews, and that is ...

**2. Faith sometimes produces the power to overcome and faith sometimes produces the power to endure. But you don't know, going in, which result you're going to get.<sup>iv</sup>**

See, for the people in the first 35 verses, faith produced the ability to overcome – the ability to win battles, to escape the edge of the sword. For the people in the last four, it produced the ability to endure *losing* the battles and *facing* the edge of the sword. And for both sets of people – win or lose, escape or no escape, faith was the key ingredient.

However, going into those situations, no one could be sure if their faith would turn out to be an “overcoming the obstacles” kind of faith or an “enduring the trials” kind of faith.

And, right now, if you're facing an obstacle or a trial in your life, guess what, you don't know, either. You don't know if God is going

to heal you or give you the power to endure sickness to the end. You don't know if God will open the door to a new job or give you the strength to endure your current job or no job; you don't know if God is going to restore your marriage or give you the strength to walk alone ... which is why it's a little silly, I think, to name and claim anything. I'm not saying you shouldn't pray and ask God for a specific outcome, believing that He can do it. You should do that – daily. Hourly, if you need to. I'm just saying you don't know if your faith is going to produce deliverance or endurance, so don't be presumptive. The only thing you can be sure of is that it will yield one or the other.

Actually, you can be sure of a little more than that. You can be sure that God kind of prefers the endurance outcome ... which, I think, is why the writer of Hebrews begins the next chapter like this:

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith [he's referring back to all the people he just listed out in Chapt. 11], let us [be like them] strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up.*

*And let us run with endurance [not deliverence] the race God has set before us. Hebrews 12:1 (NLT)*

See, endurance is an extremely valuable quality to God.

**In fact, James writes ...**

*When your faith is tested [when it doesn't go the way you've been praying it would go], your endurance has a*

*chance to grow. So let it  
grow, for when your  
endurance is fully developed,  
you will be perfect and  
complete, needing nothing.  
James 1:3-4 (NLT)*

You could almost make a case here, that it's almost better to have faith and *not* get the result you're asking for because that means your faith is going to be tested and that will produce endurance in you. And endurance, James says, is what produces completeness and maturity in us, which is why, I think, God prefers it.

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So, even though you have great faith, sometimes you don't receive the promise. And sometimes faith produces the power to overcome; sometimes it produces the power to endure and you don't know in advance which result you're going to get.

But there's one more conclusion we can draw from Hebrews 11.

**3. Faith is ultimately not trust in the promises of God. It is trust in the *person* of God.**

God does not ask us to "have faith in faith," kind of like what we saw in the drama. He asks us to have faith in Himself; to trust that even if things are not working out, he loves us and cares for us and will do what is necessary for us when we need it.

**The great Christian author, Oswald Chambers, once wrote that ...**

"Faith for my deliverance is not faith in God. Faith means, whether I am visibly delivered or not, I will stick to my belief that God is love."

See, there comes a point in life – and maybe



it comes many times – where you and I must decide “I’m going to trust God, love God and serve God regardless of whether or not God does as I expect or desire.” A lot of people don’t realize that there’s a point in life where we have to do what God does. We have to choose to love God in the same way he loves us – which is *unconditionally*; a point where we say, “even if God doesn’t come through as I think He should, I love Him anyway. I’ll love Him for who He is, not for what He does, and I’m not leaving Him.” There’s a maturing in our faith that allows us to say that.

That’s the idea behind one of my favorite OT stories. I’m sure you’ve heard it. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – three young men, servants of the God of Israel, who refuse to bow down to the idol of King Nebuchadnezzar. The King says, “Have it your way, gentlemen, but if you don’t bow down, I’m throwing you into the fiery furnace

and your god will not be able to deliver you.”

And their response?

*“If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king.*

*But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”*

*Daniel 3:17-18 [NIV]*

“Even if He does not” ... that’s what it looks like to trust in the person of God; to believe that even if, after all your prayers, it doesn’t work out, He is still absolutely good; He is still absolutely for you; and that He has a better plan for your life that goes far beyond your short time on this Earth.

And, I know at some point, some of you are saying, "Wait a minute. Why would I believe that? Okay, if I'm praying, and God never intervenes in a miraculous way, why would I even believe that He loves me?" Let me just tell you something. I don't know of any place in the New Testament, or in the Bible at all, that says "when God does a miracle for you, when God answers your prayer, that means He loves you" – I just don't see it. But, you know what I do see – God shows His great love in this, that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. If God never answers a prayer in your life, if God never answers a prayer in my life in the way that I hope or expect, or in the timing I think it ought to be, or you think it ought to be – we don't go to that. We go to the cross. We go to the fact that God loved us so much and that because of that love He did something in history. And, that's what we always go back to – to the

CROSS.

Let's pray together ...

1. Even though you have great faith, sometimes you don't receive the promise.
2. Sometimes faith produces the power to overcome; sometimes it produces the power to endure and you don't know in advance which result you're going to get.
3. Faith is ultimately not trust in the promises of God. It is trust in the person of God.

What Jesus experienced, what he did for us. Help us to trust that above all. In his name, Amen.

**CLOSING COMMENTS**

# Endnotes

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[spencerhope.org/index.php/component/biblestudy/?view=studydetails&id=94&format=pdf](http://spencerhope.org/index.php/component/biblestudy/?view=studydetails&id=94&format=pdf)

ii *ibid*

iii Larry Osborne, *10 Dumb Things Smart Christians Believe*, chapter 1.

iv See [www.doorofhope.org.au/content.php?page\\_id=85](http://www.doorofhope.org.au/content.php?page_id=85)