

Doubt: Dark Side of Faith II

Trust Fall

September 9, 2012

PRELUDE – “Love the Lord”

**Congregational Songs – “Love the Lord” /
“You Never Let Go”**

Feature – “Give Your Heart a Break”

As you know, if you’ve been around for the past couple of months, we’ve been talking about doubt.

- Doubt related to the big and cosmic “God questions” – how do we know God is really there? Why does evil exist if God is good and powerful? If the Bible is God’s Word, why are there some things in

it that don't seem to make sense to us?

- And doubt about our own personal experience with God – am I really saved and forgiven of everything? Is God really speaking to me or maybe just my imagination?

But, this morning, we're going to get really personal about doubt. We're going to address the question that represents the bottom line; the question that is the reason why all the other questions matter in the first place. And that is ... *can I really trust God with my life?*

See, it's one thing to have a little more clarity on those big and cosmic "God questions" and to have a little more

insight into those questions about our experience with God (and I think, based on your feedback, that this series has helped in that way) ... it's one thing to have clarity and insight on those matters *but it's quite another matter altogether to believe that God can be trusted* in whatever situation in which we currently find ourselves (or in which we might *someday* find ourselves). Based on those "doubt lists" we collected at the beginning of this series, that's a significant challenge for many of us.

Listen to some of the things that people wrote:

- "How do I put *all* of my faith in God?"

- “How do you turn your life over to God if you are a control freak? I hold back or I try to take matters into my own hands.”
- “How do I trust God's plan for my life when life is not what I believe it should be (no kids, no mate, no money)?”
- “I doubt I will be able to pay my bills, then I give that worry to God, but I go back and forth and I feel terrible because I know in my heart God loves me.”
- “What do I do with negative thoughts when facing a life challenge?”
- “Life is good for me – so why do I fear that the bottom might drop out?”

- “Why would God care about me when so many others have bigger problems?”

Just this past week, I had three separate conversations with individuals in this church who love God – people who are “backbone of the church” kind of folks – about this very issue.

- One person said they knew that God wanted them to do something, but they were afraid to “jump.”
- Another described several major life challenges and said, “if this is a test from God, I don’t know how much more I can take.”
- Another said they were worried about the future if things don’t

begin to change politically and economically in this country – “what’s the world going to be like for my kids?”

They were all saying the same thing but in a different way:

“I’m having trouble believing that God is going to <fill-in-the-blank with whatever the issue might be>”

“I’m struggling to believe that He will make my marriage better; help me find a job; make enough money; take care of my kids; be there when I need Him; solve this problem or that problem, etc, etc, etc.”

They were saying, “it’s a challenge for me to believe that if I trust Him and do

what He says, He won't break my heart. It's a challenge to believe that, instead, He wants to give my heart a break" (to quote that Demi Levato tune the band just did.¹)

Have you ever felt that way? I have. I think all of us have.

To make matters worse, most of us feel guilty about feeling that way! We hear these great stories of faith – of people who seemingly never struggle to trust God through the worst of times – and we look at ourselves and wonder "what's wrong with me?"

Misunderstanding "Faith"

And that makes me sad because, I don't think there is as much wrong with us as there is with *our understanding of faith*. Let me explain.

I think every serious Christian – and even those who are only slightly interested in Christianity – is aware of what the Bible says about the power of faith to change things.

For example, Jesus himself once said.

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)

And on another occasion, he said ...

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

And there are stories all over the gospels that illustrate the truth of what he said, like the one in Matthew's Gospel about a woman who suffered from some kind of a bleeding problem for 12 years. Matthew says that she had faith that if she could just touch Jesus' robe, she would be healed. And so, she fought her way through the crowd and reached out to Jesus ...

And He said to her...

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

Then there was the time when Jesus was approached by a blind man who believed that Jesus could heal him. He began to shout out "Son of God, have mercy on me." The crowd tried to shut him up, but he persisted.

And when Jesus heard him crying out he 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 the Apostle Paul met a man who had been crippled from birth. He had never walked in his life.

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)

It's hard to miss the point of these passages and others like them. *They teach us that faith can cause big things to happen.*

That's why there are many popular books and preachers these days advising Christians to "name it and claim it"; to "believe it and receive it" because, if you have enough faith, you *will get it* – whatever "it" might be.

And that's the understanding of "faith" that most of us have. If you just have enough of it, *faith will fix things*. The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it!

And that's true as far as it goes. But it doesn't go far enough because that's not *all* the Bible says about faith when it comes to facing the challenges of day-to-day living.

And that's why we get messed up. *We're not looking at the complete*

picture and, therefore, both our expectations of God and our judgment about the quality of faith that we have are out of whack.

So, I want to take a few minutes to look at what *else* the Bible has to say about faith that gives us a much broader and, I think, healthier perspective. To do that, I want to look at the quintessential statement on faith in the New Testament: the 11th chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews. Before I read it to you, let me set the background just a bit.

Following Jesus in the second half of the first century wasn't easy. In fact, it was illegal in the Roman Empire and some Christians were severely persecuted for their faith. Rome didn't have a Bill of

Rights which included “freedom of religion” and, apparently, a sizeable group of Jewish Christians (to whom this letter was written) were having second thoughts about following Christ, having second thoughts about Christianity. Some had already decided that the price of following Jesus was too high – their faith wasn’t getting them the result they had hoped for – so they “unconverted” back to Judaism.

And the purpose of the letter was to encourage any other believers who were thinking about following those folks who had left to stay committed to Christ, a theme which comes up again and again throughout 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 right after this statement, for 31

verses, the writer lists person after person after person from the Old Testament – the “ancients” – and how God did amazing things because of their great faith, starting with the patriarchs Abraham and Sarah and going all the way down to a Canaanite prostitute by the name of Rahab who repented and then had so much faith that she risked her life to help the Israelites enter into the Promised Land, and she was spared.

And then, 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)

Incredible!

Now, if you stop right there – and a lot of people do when they read this chapter – it’s easy to conclude that this passage is teaching the exact same thing as the ones we read earlier: that, because *these people had faith*, things worked out just like they hoped. Their faith fixed things.

However ... after recounting the amazing tales of people whose faith literally produced miracles, the writer goes on to tell the rest of the story: the dark side of faith.

There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection [when Christ returns]. Some people

[because of their 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.*

Wow! Doesn't that make you want to sign up to be a Christian? In stark contrast to all the people listed at the

beginning of this chapter, for these folks faith *didn't fix anything*. In fact, it actually made things worse – a lot worse than they would have been without faith.

But 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)

Even though their faith didn't "work" as most of us would define "working," God considered them to be spiritual giants, worthy to be listed in the Faith Hall of Fame. There was no rebuke or condemnation from God saying, "If you just had more faith, I wouldn't have had

to let them saw you in half. Just believe a little bit. Work with me here.” That’s not there.

Instead, those who *didn’t* receive what was promised were commended for being as faith-filled as those who did.

The Truth about Trust

And I think this is a major part of that “broader perspective on faith” that we need to have.

1. Faith does not guarantee things will get better anytime soon – maybe not ever in this life.

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.

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 has the power to do something. That's faith and don't let anyone tell you it's not just because things don't get fixed in your life. *Even though you have great faith, sometimes you don't receive the promise. Faith does not guarantee things will get better*

anytime soon.

Of course, if that's true, someone might question "so what good is faith then? Why even bother if sometimes it doesn't change things?"

That leads to a second part of that broader perspective on faith that we see here in the 11th chapter of Hebrews, and that is ...

2. Sometimes faith changes circumstances; sometimes it changes us. But you don't know, in any given situation, which result you're going to get.ⁱⁱ

See, for the people in the first 35 verses of Hebrews 11, faith changed circumstances. They were given the

ability to overcome – to win the battles and to escape the edge of the sword. For the people in the last four, however, their faith changed them: they were given the ability to endure losing the battles and endure 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, none of them knew ahead of time which result they were going to get – if their faith would turn out to be a changing-the-circumstances kind of faith or a changing-me 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 ...

You don't know if your faith is going to produce deliverance or endurance. The only thing you and I can be sure of is that it *will* yield one or the other. That's how the writer can, with integrity, tell these people – and us - “do not throw away your confidence in God; it **WILL**

be richly rewarded." It WILL produce one of these two results in your life.

Furthermore, the kind of faith that changes you and gives you the ability to endure is highly valued in the eyes of God; as highly valued as the kind of faith that changes circumstances.

That's why, I think, 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 Chapter 11 who either overcame or endured], let

*us strip off every weight
that slows us down,
especially the sin that so
easily trips us up.*

Here he's not talking about sin in general, he's talking about the sin of unbelief – of becoming so discouraged by what's happening or not happening that you quit following Jesus. Don't get tripped up by that he says.

Instead ...

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

And I think he says that because most of the time - and if you've been

following Christ for a while you know this - faith is not going to change your circumstances. It's going to change you so that you can endure.

Friends, do you see this? This is a much broader perspective on faith.

- There's no guarantee that things will get better anytime soon – maybe not even in this life.
- And even though faith sometimes changes our circumstances, more often it changes us and gives us the power to endure.

I think some of us are probably very

encouraged by that because we've been beating ourselves up over our lack of faith, but our faith isn't the problem. It's our understanding – or misunderstanding – of faith that's the problem.

Pastoral Advice

Now, with all of that as backdrop, I want to briefly give you three pieces of pastoral advice that I think will help with the struggle to trust God on an everyday basis; to turn all of our lives over to Him even when things don't seem to be working out like we had hoped.

I think this first one is obvious:

1. Stop worrying about things you cannot control and take responsibility for what you can control.

God is the one who is ultimately responsible for all the stuff “out there” that’s out of your control. You and I are responsible for everything that’s in our sphere of influence.

And when we try to change places with God – when we focus on what’s out there and neglect what’s in here – we get all concerned about things that are not our responsibility and we become consumed with worry. And that’s a waste of energy because ...

... as Jesus said.

"Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?"

Luke 12:25-26 (NIV)

"Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

Matthew 6:34 (NIV)

Just take responsibility for what is in front of you right now – today – and let God handle the rest.

The second piece of advice I would give you is to ...

2. Focus more on personal obedience than circumstantial results.

Be more concerned with enduring – doing whatever God says no matter what the result – than with how God ought to deliver you from whatever situation you're in.

Now, don't hear what I'm not saying. I'm not saying don't pray and ask God to step in and dramatically change things. Absolutely you should pray that. Just don't forget that the result of your faith – whether it changes you or changes your circumstances – that's God's department, That's God's decision.

That's why the Book of Proverbs encourages us to ...

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. Proverbs 3:5-6 (NIV)

For most of us, in any given situation we have it all figured out what God should do. We "understand" what ought to happen in our lives. And, again, pray for that, that's fine ... but the scripture is saying, don't put all your weight on that. Don't trust in that. Don't be so sure that your understanding is right.

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.”

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, 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 and not lean on your own understanding; to believe that even if, after all your prayers, it doesn't work out, God is still absolutely good; that, as

Chambers wrote, "He is love."

That's leads to my third – and probably the most important – piece of advice.

3. Rest in the truth that, in Christ, you are loved and accepted by God.

I'm not talking about settling the cosmic question of whether or not God is a good and loving Supreme Being (as important as it is to wrestle with that). What I'm talking about is settling in your heart and mind the question of whether or not you believe that a good and loving God loves and accepts you just as you are and not as you should be. Because, in this life, friends, you and I are never going to be all that we should be.

This is the foundation of all faith and trust. As one of my favorite authors, Brennan Manning, puts it:

“You will trust God to the degree that you know you are loved by Him.”

Because ...

Perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love. 1 John 4:18 (NLT)

You've not come to fully rest in God's love if you are afraid; if you believe that

being “sawed in half” – or however your circumstance is not working out in the way you hoped – is God’s way of punishing you, or testing you for something, then you’ve not come to fully rest in his love.

And, I know at this point, some of you are thinking, “Wait a minute. Why would I believe that if I’m praying and asking God to intervene in my life, and He never does, why would I believe that He loves me? I’ve never experienced it, but I’d bet it’s a hard thing to believe that God truly loves and accepts you when you are being thrown into the furnace or sawed in half!”

Good point. However, this goes back to the principle we learned in the very first

message of this series.

Slide – diagram of Cross in middle

The apostles didn't go around preaching "when God does a miracle for you, when God answers your prayer, that means He loves you and that means you can trust Him." That wasn't the good news they preached.

What they preached was "God shows His great love in this, that while we were yet sinners, Christ, the center of your faith, died for us."

What they preached was ...

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not

*also, along with him,
graciously give us all
things? Romans 8:31-32
(NIV)*

*Who shall separate us
from the love of Christ?
Shall trouble or hardship
or persecution or famine
or nakedness or danger or
sword? As it is written:*

*"For your sake we face
death all day long; we are
considered as sheep to be
slaughtered."*

Romans 8:35-36 (NIV)

*No, in all these things we
are more than conquerors
through him who loved
us.*

For I am convinced that

*neither death nor life,
neither angels nor
demons, neither the
present nor the future, nor
any powers,*

*... neither height nor
depth, nor anything else
in all creation, will be
able to separate us from
the love of God that is [not
"in our feelings"; not
'in our good and pleasant
circumstances"] but in
Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Romans 8:38-39 (NIV)

If God never answers a prayer in your life again, if God never answers a prayer in my life again 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 let that dissuade us. We don't

let that pull us away because, it's not about our experience – it's about the cross. You go to the center. You go to the fact that God loved us so much that Jesus did something amazing for us in history – he got on a cross and he gave his life for our sin. And on the third day, God raised him up. That's what our faith is in. It's in what Jesus did, not in what happens in our life.

Closing

As we close this morning, I'm going to ask the band to get into place. I want us to take a few moments to reflect on what I've just talked about.

Some of us came in today and we're

carrying this burden and, "I'm trying to have faith, but it's not working. Something is wrong with me." And, that's not true. Here's what I want you to do. Whatever the situation is in your life right now that you're stressed over, I want you to imagine in your mind what it would be like to ...

1. Stop worrying about the things you cannot control and instead, start taking responsibility for what you can control. Today, make a commitment to God, "I'm going to focus on what *I* can handle."
2. Then, what if you made the decision to say, "I'm going to stop focusing so much on the circumstantial results and how I

think God ought to make it all work out, and I'm going to start focusing on personal obedience. God, this is what you told me to do - either the jump you told me to take or just the simple obedience to what you put in the scripture - I'm going to focus on that." What would that look like in your life?

3. Finally, what would it look like to rest in the truth that, in Christ, you are loved and accepted by God - not in your experience - but in the fact of what Jesus did and how it changed everything. And even though your faith may not change your life in this life, it will change in the future. You know, all those people who got sawed in half? The

scripture tells us that the day is coming when Jesus returns and he's going to put them all back together. The whole thing is going to be set right. Redemption is coming. It may not be in this life, but it's coming. So, rest in the fact that it's what Jesus did on the cross that proves his love, not necessarily what happens in your life.

Let's pray.

God, we thank you for this truth. We thank you that you don't leave us in the dark. God, we thank you that you tell us how your kingdom works.

I pray that some of us this morning would do what Jesus said, to repent

and believe that the kingdom is here and the kingdom is now, and that even though it may not work out how we think it should, you are with us, you are for us and you love us. Give us the power and strength to endure if that's what you've called us to do. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Drama – “Let Go” (monologue)
Feature – “Be Still”

Endnotes

ⁱ I'm referring to Demi Levato's Give Your Heart a Break

ⁱⁱ See www.doorofhope.org.au/content.php?page_id=85