

Faith That Works
(Level III: Trusting God's Ways)

When God Doesn't Make Sense

December 7, 2014

8:15/9:33/11:03

PRELUDE – Immortal, Invisible

Feature – “Ain't It Fun”

Worship Songs

Immortal, Invisible

Angels from the Realms of Glory

Feature – “A Strange Way to Save the World”

Good morning everyone.

In Matthew's Gospel chapter 1 beginning in verse 18 we read ...

This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.

As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. “Joseph, son of David,” the angel said, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.

Matthew goes on to tell us that, sometime later, Wise Men (or Magi) from the East came to honor and recognize Jesus as the newborn king over Israel ... an event which was not well-received by the current king – Herod – who had been appointed by the Romans.

After the wise men were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother,” the angel said. “Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

That night Joseph left for Egypt with the child and Mary, his mother, and they stayed there until Herod's death. Matthew 1:13-21,24-25; 2:13-15 (NLT)

We'll come back to this in just a few minutes but, as Shannon said, we are continuing in our series “Faith That Works” – trying to come to an understanding of what faith really is and what it looks like in the real world. And we're doing this because, for most people, faith is a nebulous concept – a vague and simple belief that somewhere out there is some kind of Divine Force(s) or Divine Power(s) who just wants us all to be nice and to feel good about ourselves.

And that's not such a bad start – I suppose it's better to believe that than to believe nothing – but that is most definitely

not *Christian faith*. Christian faith is not nebulous in the least. In fact, it's quite clear though it's not simple. That's because it's multi-dimensional. When I read the Bible and see what it says about faith and about people who have faith, I see three levels of faith that build one on top of the other.

Level I Faith trusts in God's *word* ... what He has said and done in the ultimate Word of God, Jesus of Nazareth.

Trust that God became a man (Jesus of Nazareth), lived a perfect life, died on a Roman cross as a substitute for our sins (paying what was owed for our sins) and then rose again on the third day. God said that's the truth about Jesus. He also said that the truth about anyone who believes in him is that they would be forgiven and would receive grace and mercy. Everything you've ever done wrong, are doing wrong or going to do wrong has been forgiven and covered by God's grace. Level I faith trusts and believes God's word on that.

Level II Faith, however, moves beyond that faith to the point where we trust God's *wisdom* (what God says on how life ought to be lived) enough to do what He says.

We make effort to arrange and align our lives with what we read, with what Jesus has taught, with what the scripture teaches, and we say, "because that's the wisdom of God, I'm going to try and follow that." The Bible actually says that if our belief in Jesus, Level I faith, doesn't start producing Level II faith in us, then something is wrong with our Level I faith. That faith, the Bible says, is of no value. It's lifeless. It's dead.

The Challenge of Level III

Now, so far in this series we've talked about both of those levels. If you're new today and you've missed some of the recent messages, just so you'll know, this is all on our website, www.northheartland.org, go to the Media tab.

But today as we begin the final few messages of this series we're going to move to the third level of faith.

The third level of faith trusts in God's ways. It has confidence in the methods God uses to direct and influence our lives.

BTW ... if you are a Christian there are two things about this that you absolutely need to know and understand. If you have come to the point in your life where you've said, "I believe that Jesus died for me. I know I'm a sinner in need of a savior. I receive him. I'm going to stop trying to justify myself before God. I'm throwing it all on Jesus and what he did."

If you're a Christian...

#1. You need to know that God promises to do just that - to direct and influence your life.

God is not the nebulous Divine Butler who arrives only when we ask for help and then leaves us to our own ways. God, for those who have believed in and received Jesus, is directing and influencing your life.

A person plans his course, but the Lord directs his steps.

Proverbs 16:9 (NET)

*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 direct your paths. Proverbs 3:5-6 (NIV)*

#2. Furthermore, you also need to know that God promises to direct your life towards a certain outcome – actually, three certain outcomes.

- a. Eternal life (heaven when you die, renewed earth when Jesus returns)
- b. Abundant life – “I have come that they might have life and have it in abundance”
- c. Godly life – not “goody two-shoes” but a quality of life that is of the same essence as God

The Bible labels this quality of life as “the Fruit of the Spirit.” When we trust Jesus (level 1) as our savior, the Bible says that God’s Spirit comes to live in us and then begins to produce fruit.

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

... as contrasted with the “works of the flesh” ... 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)

Left to ourselves, when all restraints are removed, that’s the fruit of the human heart in its natural condition because of sin.

But, if we believe in Jesus, God will *not* leave us to ourselves. God is committed to transforming us by directing and influencing our lives in such a way that we experience more of his kind of life (the fruit of the Spirit) and, as Jesus put it, experience it “in abundance” ... forever and ever. Pretty amazing.

The challenge for most of us is in believing, trusting, and having faith that *what is happening right now* in our lives is actually leading to that outcome. It’s in believing, trusting, and having faith that God is doing what God has promised to do.

Of course, in reality, it’s not too much of a challenge to believe when things are going well for us. When the circumstances of our lives are fairly pleasant most Christians would say, “Sure, I believe that God is directing and influencing my life. In fact, that’s why things are so good. I’m blessed, praise Jesus.”

But when things are not going so well ... when we look at what God is doing or not doing (or allowing or not allowing) in our lives and *it doesn't make sense to us* ... then it’s hard to have faith. It’s a challenge to trust that God is really there; really for us instead of against us.

I think that’s where Joseph (in the passage we read from Matthew) may have found himself ... although, unfortunately, we’ve heard this story so many times we tend to overlook just how nonsensical the whole thing must have felt to Joseph as it unfolded.

- For example (put yourself in his shoes) his wife-to-be, Mary, has just told him that she is pregnant. But she has not been with any other man. Her son has been conceived by the Holy Spirit.

- And then an angel comes to him in the middle of the night and tells him, “don’t worry Joe, her story is legit. Go ahead and marry her.”

And, of course, he does. And then it gets worse.

- By marrying Mary his reputation would be ruined, and possibly his business. He would be considered a weakling, a disgrace; he would be laughed at as the fool who had been “taken in” by Mary.
- Then in a cruel twist of irony, he can’t have sex with her until the baby is born. No special wedding night, no honeymoon.
- Then the government implements some kind of tax reform which requires a very long journey over dangerous roads with a pregnant wife.
- But the trip to Bethlehem isn’t a sweet return to the hometown for the holidays. His son – or at least, the boy who will call him “father” – is born in a stable or a cave.
- Then the maniac king (Herod) hears of the birth and orders the death of every boy under the age of two in the region so they flee to a country in the opposite direction from where they had been living; a country in which they will be illegal immigrants for at least two years.

I don’t know about you but in his position, I would have a hard time believing that God was directing and influencing my life towards “abundance” and the “fruit of the Spirit” – at least the “joy and peace” part of it. I think most of us would.

In fact, I think a lot of us would be tempted to say “since what God is doing doesn't make sense to me, I’m going to give up. I’m going to give up on this God- thing; trying to have a relationship with Him. I’m going to give up on trusting His wisdom on how to live. Instead, I will trust only myself from here on out because, obviously, *believing in Jesus and doing what He says isn’t doing very much for me.*”

And, in fact, that’s what a lot of people – Christians – do. They give up because what God is doing (or not doing) doesn’t make sense to them. They can’t see how what is happening to them is actually taking them to the outcome that God promises. And their faith stops at Level II and then begins to drop until it hits that point where the Apostle James says “it’s lifeless. It’s dead.”

Faithful Faith

But living and growing faith – mature faith, level III faith – instead of giving up *remains faithful to God* even when we can’t figure out God’s ways. Mature faith – faithful faith – continues to love and listen to God in spite of circumstances.

And why is that? What characteristics do we find in this kind of faith that aren’t present in less mature faith? If we want to see our faith hang in there when we don’t understand what God is doing, it might be worth knowing this.

As I thought about it, I think there are three things we see in Bible people – like Joseph and Mary – who had great faith in spite of circumstances.

1. Humility – admitting we're not as smart as God.

*“My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,” says the Lord.
“And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine.
For just as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so my ways are higher than your ways
and my thoughts higher than your thoughts. Isaiah 55:8-9 (NLT)*

- a. We can't see what He sees – “I know the end from the beginning.”
- b. We don't have the wisdom He has to evaluate what is good or not good.

Humility says that maybe, just maybe, God really does know what He is doing by directing and influencing our lives in whatever way He is currently directing and influencing.

2. Perspective – understanding that God's story (not ours) is the main story.

It's kind of funny. The song by Paramore at the very beginning of the service – “Ain't it fun” – had some pretty good theology in it. It said “The world don't orbit around you.”¹ Bad grammar; good theology.

The world don't orbit around you – your story is not the main story. And that's a good thing because your story and my story is filled with lots of ups and downs; lots of unknowns; lots of things that you can't figure out. And when the perspective is that this is the main story, God is just along for the ride ... and not doing very much.

But the correct perspective is that the world orbits around God. His story is the main story. And it's very clear because it's very long and we have a whole set of writings about it called The Bible. God's story (at least as it intersects with our stories) ...

- Starts with creation
- Moves to the fall of creation because of sin
- Then to Jesus and the rescue of creation through what He did on the cross and in his resurrection
- And finally we're told that the story will climax in the renewal and restoration of creation when Jesus returns one day.

The point is that God's big story is going somewhere and, if I am a Christian, my little story is being carried along inside of God's story. And since I know where his story is going, I also know where mine is going and it's good.

Certainly this had to be the understanding of Joseph and Mary ... they knew ahead of time, from what the angel had told each of them separately, where the big story was going and so they knew where their stories were going. And it gave them perspective that enabled them to walk in faith in spite of the fact that their circumstances didn't make a whole lot of sense.

So, two characteristics of mature faith – humility and perspective. Here's a third ...

3. Realism – accepting that faith may not (and often does not) make things easier.

Notice that after the angel spoke to Joseph and confirmed Mary's story, Joseph believed ... Joseph's faith increased ... but things got harder.

Unfortunately, that's not what a lot of people expect is going to happen.

What most people expect is something more like this.

“Life's problems: one solution – Jesus. It's just that easy.” (T-SHIRT)

Now, I think the person who designed that shirt had good intentions. And there is an element of truth in it: *life lived in the will and grace of God is definitely better than life lived outside of his will and grace*. But it's so easy to interpret it – and Jesus – as just another incarnation of the mindset that dominates our culture: *that service ought to be quick and life ought to be easy*. And, if you can't figure out on your own how to make that happen for you, well then, “just add Jesus.”

And a lot of people – good Christian people – look at Jesus in that way. They think, “Well, now that I've got Jesus, my life is going to get better.”

My husband or wife will get their act together. My health will improve.

I'll get a good job. I'll make more money. I'll be protected from tragedy.

My kids will turn out alright. I won't suffer from anxiety or depression.

I'll be able to immediately quit smoking or drinking or lose weight, or get rid of any other bad habit that's driving me and everyone else around me crazy.

“Now, because I've found Jesus, things ought to be lots better – praise God and thank-ya Jesus.”

But the reality is – and it's shown in what happened to Mary and Joseph and countless other believers – the reality is that faith's purpose isn't to make life easier; it's to make the hard things of life easier to handle. Let me say that again ... the purpose of faith isn't to make life easier; it's to make the hard things of life easier to handle.

That's why the Apostles were constantly preaching things like ...

Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. Instead [have this perspective], be very glad—for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world. 1 Peter 4:12-13 (NLT)

That's realism.

Developing Faith

If you are struggling with what God is doing or not doing (allowing or not allowing) in your life ... what kind of faith do you have? The kind that continues to love God and listen to God? Or the kind that is ready to walk away from Him when things don't go the way you think they should?

Actually, a better question is what kind do you *want* to have? I presume since you are here you want the former – the

kind of faith that continues to deepen and develop. So, the question is ... how does that happen?

I think there are three things we need to do.

1. **Repent of the lack of humility, perspective and realism whenever it is revealed.**

And it will be revealed.

Interesting story ... Mary and Jesus' brothers later in life! ...

One time Jesus entered a house, and the crowds began to gather again. Soon he and his disciples couldn't even find time to eat. When his family heard what was happening, they tried to take him away. "He's out of his mind," they said. Mark 3:20-21 (NLT)

Mary, the mother of God, thought her son was out of his mind. Thought he was crazy. She had a lack of perspective. She had a lack of humility. She had a lack of realism when it came to faith. So, it was revealed to her and she had to repent. And it will be revealed to you and me.

And, again, repenting is changing your mind. It's when you look at your life and go, "man, I'm thinking like I know better than God. That's the truth about me, and I need to change that. God, I submit that to you." Or, "God, my perspective has been that my life is all about me and I'm just p.o.'d because you're not doing what I think you should. Well, no, God, I'm wrong." Or, "God, I'm expecting that faith is going to make my life easy. And I've got that wrong. I need to change that." That's what repenting is.

2. **Pray for faith.**

Faith isn't something you can necessarily generate on your own. Faith, in the Bible, is actually described as a gift. It's something that God gives to us. So, if it's a gift, then you can ask for it. Pray for faith.

Interesting story ... the disciples couldn't cast out a demon ...

So they brought the boy to Jesus. When the spirit saw him, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell on the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?"

And he said, "From childhood. It has often thrown him into fire or water to destroy him. But if you are able to do anything, have compassion on us and help us."

Then Jesus said to him, "'If you are able?' All things are possible for the one who believes."

Immediately the father of the boy cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

Mark 9:20-24 (NET)

Pray for faith. Ask God to increase it.

Ok, one more thing in addition to repenting and asking for faith ... and this is going to sound a little on the simplistic side but it's recommended again and again ... and that is to just ...

3. **Continue in your faith.**

Just keep at it. Just keep going. Whatever level of faith you have ... keep pushing into it, keep working it into your daily life.

Luke, writing in the book of Acts talks about how Paul and Barnabas were traveling around the Roman world starting new churches. And at one point he says that they went back to visit some of those churches and ...

They strengthened the believers.

But guess how they strengthened them?

They encouraged them to continue in the faith, reminding them that “we must suffer many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God.” Acts 14:22 (NLT)

Notice again the idea that faith doesn't make life any easier and maybe even harder. But the encouragement either way is simply to continue in the faith.

Just ... carry on. Keep on keeping on ... no matter what. Don't give up. Don't quit.

- Keep reading the Bible.
- Keep praying.
- Keep going to church
- Keep hanging out with your small group,
- Keep serving and giving ...

Just *continue* to live and do what God has already shown you to live and do one day at a time. That's the secret to deepening and developing your faith.

Biblical writers often called this quality “perseverance” and labeled it as the difference between spiritual winners and losers. But perseverance isn't a word we hear very much anymore, so one contemporary writer, Eugene Peterson, came up with a definition that's pretty helpful.

He said that perseverance is a “long obedience in the same direction.”

Just keep heading in the right direction – which is following Jesus – day after day after day and it will pay off in a stronger faith.

As I was preparing for this message, I came across a sermon by a pastor named Eugene Harder that used this same quote from Peterson. Harder wrote:

“Over the years many desperate people have knocked on my door seeking solutions for their painful problems.

Most of the problems involved spouses, money and children. Some people expected me to produce instant, miracle solutions.

“People with the family and marriage problems wanted a magic prayer to instantly solve years of bad habits, adverse attitudes and selfish neglect. Some expected me to do a makeover job on their spouse. Those with financial woes were convinced another loan was the cure all.

“Few people were interested in solutions that involved a long obedience in the same direction.

Then he concluded:

“Today, there is a great market for religious experiences (Moralistic Therapeutic Deism) but little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue ...

We want enough Christianity to make us feel good about God, but not enough to help us commit to living the life [of faith] when times get tough!ⁱⁱ

I wonder, friends about you and me. Are we committed to “continuing” in our faith? Are we committed to a long obedience in the same direction ... regardless of what happens?

That’s how the Christian life is lived: *regardless*.

- Regardless of circumstances, opposition, feelings, discouragements, and hardships.
- Regardless of emotions, put-downs, doubts, and obstacles.
- Regardless of whether or not what God is doing in any given moment makes sense to us.

Conclusion

So, humility, perspective, realism; repenting, praying and continuing. As long as we’re on this side of eternity, that’s the plan.

But again ...

What we suffer now [the stuff that doesn’t make sense to us] is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later.

Romans 8:18 (NLT)

Even though it’s confusing and even nonsensical at times, the truth is that God has great plans for us, friends. Eternal life ... abundant life ... godly life. That’s where you *are* heading. That’s what you *will* receive for your trust in Him. You may not get there today. You may not get there tomorrow. But you *will* get there.

And so God’s word to you this morning is the same as what the angel told Joseph. “Fear not.”

Let’s pray.

<PRAYER>

Feature / Dance – “Great Plans”

Santa’s Workshop ... Dec. 13

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/paramore/aintitfun.html>

ⁱⁱ Eugene Harder, at <http://www.newhope.bc.ca/99-01-24.htm>