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On the eve of the most devastating event in the history of the world, Jesus told His disciples to have faith in Him: "Ye believe in God, believe also in me" (John 14:1, KJV). When the guards took Jesus away and the authorities put Him to death, however, the disciples fled in terror. They witnessed the events and believed their Master was defeated. They failed to understand that in the midst of what appeared to be defeat, Christ was the victor. Sin, death, Satan, and the powers of evil were totally vanquished. Unfortunately, the disciples trusted their senses instead of the Lord.

Faith has a grasp of reality which the senses alone cannot supply. While the world holds that "seeing is believing," the Bible points toward a reality which is perceived "by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). Faith may operate independently of the senses, or it may operate in defiance of the senses! More than simple a form of knowledge, faith is the spiritual quality that interprets and assigns meaning and value to all other forms of knowledge. Faith in Jesus Christ governs how one will react to every other fact or event in the universe. Jesus told His disciples to believe in Him because that belief or faith would form the basis for anything else that might follow. Without faith, they could not receive what He wanted to give to them. In those last moments with them around the table and before He went into the garden to pray, Jesus exhorted His closest friends to have faith in Him. Each time He exhorted them to faith, He gave a promise of what faith in Him would make possible.

In John 14:1-7, Jesus explains that faith is the way one receives eternal life. In John 14:8-17, Jesus explains that faith is the basis for access to God through prayer. Whereas acceptance of what Jesus said forms an aspect of faith, belief in the ideas He taught is not the focus of faith.

Jesus did not call for His disciples to believe the ideas so much as He called for them to believe Him. What Jesus taught becomes believable only if one has faith in Jesus.

Faith as Response

Abraham holds a unique place in the Bible. Because of his faith in God, he became the father of the people to whom God entrusted the oracles and the written Word (Rom. 3:2; Heb. 1:1). He stands as a prime example of faith. All of the Gospels refer to Abraham in his special role as the father of the Jews. He is also mentioned by Paul, James, Peter, and the author of Hebrews. Christians, Jews, and Muslims all acknowledge Abraham.

Abraham's virtue, however, did not lie in believing in the existence of God. Adam and Eve believed in God enough to want to be just like Him. They had firsthand, personal experience with God. Cain believed in God enough to worship Him and offer sacrifices to Him. The people of the earth believed in God enough to build a tower that would reach all the way to heaven. While people may be sinful by nature, they are also religious by nature (Acts 17:22; Rom. 1:25). Abraham's faith involved more than simple belief that God exists.

Belief in the existence of God has nothing much to commend it if that belief has no effect on a person. It corresponds to the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30). Three servants are given different sums of money to administer in the absence of their master. When the master returns, he finds that two of the servants handled their money well, but the third servant did absolutely nothing with his. The anger of the master focuses on the fact that the servant knew the master well enough to have done something:

“You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed, and gather where I have not winnowed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest” (Matt. 25:26-27).

For all his knowledge of the master, the servant behaved as though the master did not exist. Belief is not so much an act of the intellect as it is an act of the will. As such Christ can command us: “Believe in God, believe also in me” (John 14:1).

Faith is the way a person reacts to the body of information found in

the Bible. Faith is the way one interprets that information and assigns meaning to it. Faith does more than say, "This information is true." Faith causes a change in behavior because this information demands a response. The sophisticated cigarette smoker may regard the surgeon general's warning on the cigarette pack as true without ever submitting to that truth. Each bit of truth in the universe has a corresponding appropriate response. Truth remains static and detached until people respond appropriately to it. The appropriate response to the surgeon general's warning would be to stop smoking. Faith requires an exercise of the will; thus, it can be commanded.

The faith of which Jesus spoke in commanding His disciples to believe required the ultimate response. Whereas the response to any truth requires some form of submission, the response to God through Jesus requires complete submission.

Faith as Trust

The Bible says that Abraham believed God. This belief went beyond believing that God exists. God made a promise to Abraham, and Abraham believed what God told him. Abraham trusted God, and the rest of his life—the rest of human history—was affected by that trust. Of all that God wants from people, it seems the beginning point is trust. If people could only trust God, it would mean the Kingdom had come. Some theologians complain that faith is too simple a basis for salvation. The adoption of a developed system of ethics would give meat and meaning to faith. Someone who has been a Christian for many years, grown in spiritual maturity, and studied the deep matters of the faith may find it easy to believe in a trusting way. Yet in all the world, trust is one of the most difficult spiritual attributes to possess. The rest will come if only that fortress of mistrust can be surrendered. In counseling situations, I have been told over and over again how difficult it is for husbands and wives to trust each other. As a prison chaplain, I have been told by countless men that they have never trusted anyone in their lives. Even as pastor of a church, I have learned that congregations are sometimes suspicious and fearful of what pastors want the church to do. Trust is hard to have. It does not come naturally.

Children are born dependent. They learn trust from their parents and other loving, concerned people. It takes children time to learn

that parents can be trusted to feed them, care for them, and not to drop them. Not all children learn to trust. Some parents only prove to their children that no one can be trusted. Some parents prove to their children that the universe is not a safe place. When these children grow up, some of them find themselves facing long prison sentences. It is difficult for them to trust a Heavenly Father they cannot see when the earthly father they could see taught them to hate.

God did not begin by explaining to Abraham the ethical demands of holiness. Instead, He made Abraham a set of promises:

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves” (Gen. 12:1-3).

God did not leave it at that. Instead, He repeated the promise seven times as recorded in Genesis 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-21; 18:9-15; 21:12; and 22:16-18.

Abraham trusted the promises of God and did things because of that trust. He left the family, friends, country, language, customs, and religion that he had known because he trusted God. His faith allowed him to make a total break with his past, though he had no basis for action but the word of God. Hebrews expresses it rather poignantly that “he went out, not knowing where he was to go” (Heb. 11:8). Abraham is the model of faith in the Bible because God expects the same sort of response from everyone on earth.

God gave no earth-shaking commission to Abraham. He did not have to preach to anyone and risk stoning like the prophets. He did not have to confront the major world ruler of his time like Moses and lead a nation for forty years. He did not have to be a warrior or a king like David. The only thing God asked Abraham to do was move! The most noteworthy event in his life happened when his wife had a baby! Abraham stands at the center of the Bible as the example of faith. The characteristic of being ordinary makes him an example because the world is filled with ordinary people. Our crises of faith rarely have to do with leading a nation or doing some mighty act. Our crises of faith may center around little ordinary things like moving and having a

baby.

Even as I sit writing these words, these two little questions are the greatest ones that probably will face me. Does God want me to stay where I am, or should I move? Does God want me to have a family to rear, or does He want me to devote myself to His family—the church? Trusting God moves from the theoretical to the practical when we begin to make the mundane, commonplace decisions of life. Faith involves living like every decision we face matters to God. Such a faith is grounded in a conviction that God's existence makes a difference in the ordinary events of life as well as the dramatic events of eternity. As an ordinary man, Abraham reminds us that faith is something that affects our lives in the ordinary moments, or it is not faith. Abraham may not have trusted God completely from the first. During a period spanning more than twenty-five years, Abraham's trust in God grew to the point that he could offer his dearest son as a sacrifice to God.

He could never have done that at the beginning when he abandoned the land God had called him to receive and went to Egypt because he feared the famine (Gen. 12:10). He could not have offered Isaac when he lied about his wife for fear that Pharaoh would kill him to get her (Gen. 12:11-13). He could not have offered Isaac when he took Hagar to bed for fear that he would never have a child by Sarah (Gen. 16:2). He could not have offered Isaac when he lied about his wife to Abimelech for fear that someone would kill him to get her (Gen. 20:11). In each of these ordinary passages of life, Abraham's fears were stronger than his trust in God. Yet, after each failure God came to Abraham again with His promises and renewed them over and over.

Faith and God's Faithfulness

God strengthened Abraham's initial faith by His own faithfulness. Despite the calamities that occurred when Abraham took matters into his own hands, God was faithful to His promise. Abraham believed God in a general, theoretical way, but like most of us, he decided that God needed a little help. Abraham acted as though the promises of God depended upon him and him alone. Each time he took matters into his own hands, he created a mess. He lost his wife twice, and only because of the faithfulness of God did he get her back. Because of his lack of trust, he committed bigamy and created bad blood between brothers that the Arabs and Jews perpetuate to this day. Yet, God

remained faithful to His promise and gave Abraham and Sarah the son they wanted.

In the end, Abraham and Sarah had faith in God because God was faithful (Heb. 11:11). Having faith is not the same as being faithful. While having faith involves trust, confidence, and assurance; being faithful involves dependability, reliability, and trustworthiness. In a marriage, it is easy to have faith in a faithful spouse. It is easy to trust a husband or wife who is reliable, dependable, and trustworthy.

Years ago my father brought home a dog. Scout was the most pitiful creature we had ever seen. His black mangy hide exposed every bone in his skinny body. He crouched in fear whenever we approached and bowed his head in anticipation of a blow. The half-starved creature did not trust people. In the first weeks, we had to keep Scout on a chain so he would not run away. As the months passed, however, he learned to trust us. He depended on us to take care of him, and he had confidence that we would. We took the chain off because it was no longer necessary. Scout had learned to trust us for all of his needs, and he chose to stay with us.

Faith is more than a sunny disposition or an optimistic attitude. Faith is more than a vague confidence that things will work out in the end. Unless faith has a basis in life and in God, it is folly. Without a reason for faith, what passes for faith is only wishful thinking. What many Christians attribute to acting by faith may be little more than selfish impulse.

At the same time, faith is not rooted in life's circumstances. Faith occurs in spite of life's circumstances, whether good or bad. Job could say, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (13:15). His faith did not depend on the changing circumstances of life. Paul said, "I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:12-13). Faith is rooted in the One who is faithful. The validity and vitality of faith depends upon the object of that faith.

Faith and Hope

Abraham and Sarah could have hope for a son, even in old age, because of their faith in the One who promised. Hope can be as great a prison as despair if it is not rooted in something or someone worthy of

the faith that is trust. Sarah "considered him faithful who had promised" even though Abraham at one hundred years old was "as good as dead" (Heb. 11:11-12). The struggle of faith always hinges on the same principle, regardless of the cold, hard realities of life: "He who promised is faithful" (Heb. 10:23). Thus, God is always the God of the future. He is the God who creates the future.

Faith flies in the face of the kind of cynicism that views life bitterly and fatalistically. *Cynicism* is an attitude of life that has reconciled itself to hopelessness. The prevalence of cynicism finds expression in Murphy's Laws: "Anything that can go wrong will go wrong," "Of all things that could go wrong, the worst of all will go wrong," and "If you mess with anything long enough, it will break." True pagans have no hope because they have nothing in which to place their faith. The cynic knows well the effect of sin in the world. The cynic has experienced the hopelessness of humanity and has accepted it. Hope is an inseparable aspect of faith. Unfortunately, the modern world tends to use the word *hope* the same way it does *wish*. A wish is a fanciful thought or desire that has no basis for being expected. Hope, on the other hand, is a concrete reality, though it is not yet seen. Faith is a form of knowledge which gives assurance of the reality of the hope (Heb. 11:1). Having hope in the midst of a desperate situation goes beyond wishing everything will turn out all right. Having hope means that one has faith that God will act. Abraham's hope was that God would provide him with a son. Hope is a reality which has not yet come to pass, but it is as sure as if it had already happened.

Faith and Love

Faith also has a dynamic relationship with love, because it is through faith that people permit themselves to be loved by God. God does not impose Himself upon people. We must permit ourselves to be loved. The willingness to be loved or to accept love involves trusting the one who is the lover. God has always loved the world, but people have not always received that love. Through faith, however, "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Rom. 5:1,5-6). Love in turn becomes the quality of spiritual life that gives direction to faith, preserving it from self-seeking arrogance (Gal. 5:6; 1 Cor. 13:2,5). Love saves faith from becoming a means to an end.

At the end of that last conversation with His disciples, the Lord assured them that the day was coming when they could pray in His name and receive from God: "For the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from the Father" (John 16:27). Faith makes true love possible, just as love leads us to have faith in someone. The disciples said that they believed that Jesus came from God. Jesus replied to them with a question: "Do you now believe?" (John 16:31). The irony of the question betrays the events that quickly followed. Human love failed in the absence of true faith. But when true faith in Christ comes, love is made perfect by Him. Jesus brings the change in a human heart when faith opens the door and believes that He really is right.

Faith becomes possible in the first place because of the love of God. God took the initiative to do what was necessary to gain our faith and trust. The sacrifice of Christ on the cross was the ultimate demonstration of faithfulness and trustworthiness: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). Faith grows as a Christian abides in the love of Christ. Abiding in Christ supplies the basis for each dimension of the fruit of a Christian life. Faith continues to grow for the Christian who can say, "I know whom I have believed" (2 Tim. 1:12).