

SPIRITUAL GROWTH part 2: PLEASING GOD, FAITH

Last week we begin looking at the subject of pleasing God. There are many great things that we can do in this year, but if they do not please God, we have failed. There is no higher calling in life, no greater privilege and opportunity than to please the God who made us.

2 Cor 5:9, "So we make it our goal to please him...."

We began our study on how to please God by considering the subject of spiritual growth. God has given us the capacity to not only know him, but to know him better. As we progress in our relationship with him, we grow. I heard a story of a little boy who fell out of bed in the middle of the night. When his mother rushed to his room to ask him what happened, he said, "I don't know. I guess I stayed too close to where I got in." So many Christians do that with their faith. For most of their Christian life they stay too close where they got in.

Today, as we talk about pleasing God, I want to speak to you on the subject of faith. Faith is one of the most used words in the bible. Sometimes the word refers to an entire religious system, such as Christianity or Islam or Judaism. But most of the time faith refers to our personal response to God, our daily, moment-by-moment trust in God. Faith is so important that Hebrews 11:6 says that without faith it is impossible to please God.

WHAT IS FAITH

1. FAITH IS BELIEVING WITHOUT SEEING

Hebrews 11:1 offers us a concise definition of faith: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."

According to this definition, faith is believing before you see, and that doesn't just apply to spiritual things. We do this every day with many things. Every time you turn on the faucet and drink water, you are exercising faith. When you open a bottle of medicine from the pharmacy and take it, you are displaying great faith. If the one who filled that prescription makes a mistake, you may get very sick or even die. When you eat out at a restaurant, you are exercising faith. You have no idea who is cooking your food or what he is really putting in it. We all believe in things that we do not see.

The King James rendering is, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." The word "substance" was sometimes used for the title deed to a piece of property. If I had a distant relative who died and left me a new home in Mississippi on two acres of land. I have confidence that it is really mine when I receive the title, even though I have never seen it. Faith is the title deed to the thing I am praying for, even though I don't see it at the present time.

“When Hudson Taylor, the famous missionary, first went to China, it was in a boat with sails. When they were very close to the shore of some cannibal Islands the wind died down to nothing, and it was slowly drifting toward the shore. Watching from the shore, the cannibals were eagerly anticipating a feast. The captain came to Mr. Taylor and asked him to pray for the help of God. ‘I will,’ said Taylor, ‘provided you set your sails to catch the breeze.’ The Captain declined to make himself a laughing stock by unfurling the sails in a dead calm. Taylor said, ‘I will not pray for the ship unless you will prepare the sails.’ And it was done. While Taylor was praying, there was a knock at the door his door. “Who is there?” The captain’s voice responded, ‘Are you still praying for wind?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Well,’ said the captain ‘you better stop praying because we have more wind than we can manage.’

Hudson Taylor was able to believe when there was nothing visible. He had evidence, and that evidence was his faith.

2. FAITH IS BELIEVING WHEN I DON'T UNDERSTAND

For thousands of years, people have wondered why things have turned out like they did, and they have asked the question “why.”

Psalm 10:1 Why do You stand afar off, O LORD? Why do You hide in times of trouble?

Psalm 22:1 My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, And from the words of My groaning?

Psalm 44:23-24, “Awake! Why do You sleep, O Lord? ... 24 Why do You hide Your face, And forget our affliction and our oppression?”

Psalm 74:1, “O God, why have You cast us off forever? Why does Your anger smoke against the sheep of Your pasture?”

Imagine that you’re about to run a race. Your coach comes up to you at the starting line and gives you a pep talk. He urges you to run well and to finish the course. Then, after he exhorts you to do your best, he hurries down the course and begins to set up obstacles in your way. He builds a wall for you to climb over. He digs a pit for you to cross. He breaks up the ground and makes it rough. And you also notice that He’s not putting the same obstacles in front of the other runners. Their way seems smoother and easier. And immediately, you begin to wonder, “Why is he doing this?” I thought he wanted me to run well—why is he making it so difficult?

Sometimes, it would seem like God is doing the same thing in our lives. He exhorts us to run well, but all these obstacles just keep on coming. Life seems like an obstacle course—just one thing after another, and we wonder why.

Philip Yancey said, “Faith means believing in advance what will only make sense in reverse.” So many things in this life make no sense to us. We want to know why things

happened the way they have and why things couldn't have happened some other way. By faith we keep on believing that God is good and that His plan is best.

3. FAITH IS A CHOICE-NOT A FEELING

John 11 gives to us one of the most moving scenes in Scripture. Jesus often stayed at the home of Lazarus and His sisters, Mary and Martha. But Lazarus died and for days his sisters had been mourning his death.

John 11:33-40, "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

This was not a happy occasion. It was one of those times when life seems to be abruptly stopped, and you are in a state of shock and unbelief. It was in that kind of emotional turmoil that Jesus asked Mary and Martha to believe in His power to turn a hopeless situation into something good. If faith depended on feelings, then it would be impossible for them to believe. But faith doesn't depend on your feelings. Faith depends on a big God who is greater than your feelings.

If Noah had waited until he "felt like" building an ark, he might never have laid the first piece of gopher wood. And if Joshua had waited to "feel like" marching around Jericho, those walls might still be standing. When you are in a hospital waiting room while a loved one is in surgery, you not feel positive. In that moment, you must choose to believe that God is who he said he is and that he will do what he said he would do.

Barbara Winter, "When you come to the end of everything you know, and are faced with the darkness of the unknown, faith is knowing one of two things will happen. Either there will be something solid for you to stand on, or you will be taught how to fly."

4. FAITH IS AN ACTIVE FORCE

Faith is never passive. James says, "faith without works is dead." Truth faith will always motivate you to do something, and we find that in Hebrews 11." This particular chapter contains a list of men and women of God in the past who have lived by faith.

FAITH WORSHIPS-Hebrews 11:5, "By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did."

Why would someone take their time to go to church every Sunday to worship God when there are so many other things he could be doing? It is because he has faith in a real God, and that faith leads him to worship.

FAITH WORKS-Hebrews 11:7, "By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith."

Noah stood alone against a whole world of ungodly, violent people and built an Ark nearly one and a half times the length of a football field and more than four stories high because he believed God. Can you imagine the mockery and jeering that Noah must have faced as he built this huge ship? It was a hundred miles from the nearest ocean and far too big to move. Why would someone spend his life doing something like that? True faith will motivate you to serve God in the way he chooses for you.

FAITH WAITS-Heb 11:8-11, "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the Promised Land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise."

No one likes to wait. Think of how you feel when you're late for an important appointment and you get caught in a traffic jam. Think about being in a hurry to be somewhere. You stop by the grocery store to pick up a few things, rush to the "10 items or less" line and then have to wait while the guy in front of you pulls 16 items out of the basket and casually chats with the clerk. That's the way Abraham must have felt. He waited 25 years before God gave him the son he had promised. The problem is that we are often in a hurry, but God is not. It takes an active, big faith to not run ahead of God and try to do on your own what God alone can do. Sometimes the greatest proof of your faith is that you simply wait.

FAITH SACRIFICES-Hebrews 11:24 says, "By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter."

Moses could have been the next king of Egypt, but he sacrificed all the wealth and power in order to lead the Israelites through a hot, thirsty desert. Why would someone do that? Moses did so because he had faith in God, and he believed that the reward that God would ultimately give him would far exceed anything this world has to offer.

Charles T. Studd was born in 1860. He became a famous All-England cricket player and earned a degree in law. When he was 17 years old, he received \$145,000 as an inheritance, but he gave it all to God's work and became a missionary.

Why would someone who had such a great future ahead of him with fame and fortune sacrifice it all in order to live a life of hardship? It's because he had faith in God and was obedient to God's call on his life.

God may never call you to become a missionary like he did C.T. Studd, but he will call you to sacrificial service. If you have a true faith in God and who he really is, your faith will motivate you to be obedient. That is what faith does. It motivates you to action. How about you? What are you willing to give up in order to bring glory to God?

5. FAITH MOVES GOD

Faith not only moves us to work on God's behalf, faith moves God to work on our behalf. God responds to our faith, not to our unbelief.

In Matthew 9, a sick woman came to Jesus believing that if she just touched His garment, she would be healed.

Verse 22 says, "Jesus turned and saw her. "Take heart, daughter," he said, "your faith has healed you." And the woman was healed from that moment."

In Matthew 9, Jesus was approached by 2 blind men. Verses 27-30 tell the story. "As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, calling out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" When he had gone indoors, the blind men came to him, and he asked them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" "Yes, Lord," they replied. Then he touched their eyes and said, "According to your faith will it be done to you"; and their sight was restored."

God is pleased when we trust him, and he answers believing prayer. That being true, faith is often the tipping point that determines the outcome of your life. All things being equal, there are times when God allows your faith to be the determining factor. What if the woman in Matthew had not had faith? She would not have been healed. What if the two blind man had not believed Jesus would heal them? They would have still been blind.

When Jesus went to His home town, Matthew 13:58 says, "And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith." That means you choose the kind of life you are going to have by how you develop your faith in God.

HOW DO YOU BUILD FAITH?

1. FILL YOURSELF WITH SCRIPTURE

George Mueller was a man who built orphanages for hundreds of children. The outstanding thing about what Mueller did is that he never asked anyone for money. He wanted to prove to the world that God answers prayer by his ability to build orphanages by faith. He told how it is that he developed his faith. He said: "I prayed for faith and thought that some day it would come down and strike me like lightning. But faith didn't seem to come. One day I read in Romans that "faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God." I had, up to this time, closed my Bible and prayed for faith. Now I opened my Bible and began to study ---and faith has been growing ever since."

2. KNOW GOD'S WILL

When we say that God answers the prayer of faith, that statement is not without boundaries.

1 John 5:14-15, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him."

No good father would give his child anything the child asked for. Good fathers give their children things that they know will be good for them, and God is no different. The first thing you need to ask yourself when you pray for something is whether or not you believe that thing to be God's will. If it is God's will, keep on believing God in pray, and you will have that thing God knows is right for you to have.

3. RESPOND IN FAITH

There are only 2 ways you can live. You can live by faith, or you can live by sight. Faith grows when you step out and trust God and see Him answer your prayers. The African Impala is a "deer-like" animal that can jump to a height of over 10 feet and leap for 30 feet in one single bound, but it can be kept in a zoo enclosure with a 3 foot wall. Why? An Impala will not jump if it can't see where its feet are going to land. Some of us are like that. Some will not try anything if they can't see how it's all going to turn out. You wanted guaranteed results. That's not the way it is with faith. If God says "Jump," then you need to jump. That's the way God's work goes on, and that's the way your life is blessed.