

FAITH ALIVE!

By

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Jesus does not demand a high IQ, great skill, physical strength, financial success or a charming personality. What He demands is FAITH.

When the apostles said to Jesus, “Increase our faith,” He answered, “If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this Sycamore tree, ‘Be rooted up and be planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you” (Luke 17:5, 6). It was not that they had some faith but needed a great deal more to do great things. They needed to exercise the faith they had. Even mustard-seed faith is sufficient.

It is not the amount of faith, but the object and direction of faith that counts. Shirley MacLaine may challenge people to faith in the “inner-self”, but it will produce only frustration and disappointment. One may develop the greatest faith, but if it is not rooted in that which God reveals, it will get him nowhere.

The disciples learned the meaning of faith and began to practice it in earnest only after the resurrection. Jesus had promised to rise again after death. This was such a far-out promise that they could not grasp it, thus, when Jesus was crucified they were miserable and defeated. Had they understood what He had promised and coupled their understanding with faith — faith that it was true — they would have been waiting for the resurrection with great expectation and excitement and probably surrounding the tomb so as not to miss it. Finally, when they realized that He did arise, that He is actually alive, they knew the meaning of faith. What Jesus said, be it ever so impossible, and unnatural, must be true.

This is faith: to trust that God always keeps His promise and that He is always right.

The classic example of faith is that of Abraham. God promised that He would bless all nations through Isaac, yet He commanded Abraham to take his son to the mountain and offer him as a sacrifice. The very idea of a human sacrifice was contrary to Abraham’s moral and ethical standards. It violated God’s own law, defeated His purpose in Isaac’s birth and would contradict the promise.

Abraham was not to rationalize the problem. He had been given a promise and now a command. His faith was in God, that He is always right and that He would carry out the promise in spite of the seeming contradiction. In fact, Abraham believed that if he obeyed God to present Isaac as a sacrifice, God would raise him from the dead in order to fulfill the promise (Gen. 22:5).

The story ends with God halting Abraham at the moment the knife was to descend, so that “in a figure” Isaac was resurrected and given back to Abraham. The original promise was fulfilled, and through Isaac’s seed Christ came to fulfill the promise (Heb. 11:19).

Abraham believed God. He had faith that God was right and that to obey His command was the right way to go.

We see this kind of faith practiced by the apostles as they faced hostile authorities, who demanded that obedience and allegiance be given to civil government

rather than to God. They were imprisoned, beaten, threatened, and commanded to preach no more in the name of Jesus. But they had their orders from Jesus. There was no debate or hesitation. “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). This is the direction of faith. God is always right, even if the visible powers (the supreme court, city council, legislature, sheriff) declare otherwise. It is not a question of quantity of faith but of a determination to practice and live by it.

Faith is to believe Christ is alive and is working all things together for good, in the midst of our suffering and apparent defeat.

Faith is to accept the commandments of Christ and to keep them. Is it really best to forgive limitlessly? Is it wise to turn the other cheek? For lack of faith men have taught that we are not expected to actually live up to the commandments; single people cannot be expected to remain chaste; it is natural to lust after a sexy woman; it's okay to take advantage of a situation for a profit; one must compromise in order to get ahead; he must obey the law even if it contradicts God's commands, such as in educating children with lies rather than with godly instructions.

It is just this kind of thinking that prompted James to write, “Faith without works is dead in itself” (James 2:17). The works he was talking about were the works of obedience to God's commands. He used Abraham as an example. “Was not Abraham our father justified by works, in that he offered up Isaac his son upon the altar?” (James 2:21). Had he refused to do so it would have shown that he did not have faith in God's promises and commands.

Modern “churchanity” implies that the sign of true faith is material and physical blessings. No longer are we content to pray, “and give us this day our daily bread.” We want steak and pie a-la-mode, then when it is not forthcoming, we whine and pout like spoiled children and petition Caesar (government) to hand it over. Faith is to believe that we have God's presence and blessing without anything else. Job expressed it perfectly: “even if He slay me, yet will I trust Him” (Job 13:15).

When all roads to our desires seem to be blocked and we begin to think that it is our faith that is weak, we need to look again at our goals. Has God commanded us to remove the Sycamore tree that it may be planted in the sea? No such command has been given, therefore we should not expect Him to assist us in the operation. When we charter our own course apart from the purpose He has set, we have no reason to think He will help us to reach it. Failure in health, in business, in career or even in the simplest daily effort, sometimes causes one to think God is not there, and faith begins to weaken. But sickness or loss may be the very best means by which one is perfected in holiness and made into the image of God. Paul wrote that Christ's power is made perfect in weakness. “Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Wherefore I take pleasure in weaknesses, in injuries, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong” (II Cor. 12:9, 10).

It is easy enough for a person to “rely” on his faith while all things are falling into place in his plans — the family is healthy, the job is secure, there's money in the bank and friends are supportive. God seems to be smiling and praise is easy. But let it all be taken away, then where's the faith?

Faith is to rejoice in God when God is all that you have.

Many have confused the meaning of faith with loyalty to the group. One who is always present at worship and who can be depended on for help with church activities is dubbed “faithful”, and from this it is said that he has “faith.” Such loyalty and activity have little to do with his trust in God when he is faced with physical and financial calamity, or when he must choose between man’s approval or obedience to God.

It was not when John wrote about love that his faith was exemplified. The whole world approves when you say, “God loves you.” But John’s faith was put to the test when he chose to obey God rather than Caesar. Note the source of that faith: the risen Christ. “And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as one dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying, ‘Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the Living one; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forever more, and I have the keys of death and Hades’” (Rev. 1:17, 18). All the sin, evil hatred and harm that man could devise was heaped upon Jesus. All forsook Him, the world was against Him and, humanly speaking, He suffered terrible defeat. Yet He is the One who said, “Have faith.” “Be not anxious.” “Fear not.” How could He say all that in the face of such awful circumstances? Because He knew his goal would be reached. He came to suffer and die and rise again! God’s plan was carried out to the letter.

If our goal is merely the satisfaction of human and temporal desires, there is no assurance we will reach it, and life is fraught with uncertainty. But if our goal is to serve God and ultimately be conformed to His image, then we are assured by His grace that the goal will be reached, and that it is the one goal than which there is none better.

To believe this and trust our lives to God in this belief is faith. Even if it is only as a grain of mustard seed, it is sufficient to give peace and joy in spite of all else.

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