

REAL FAITH Part 1

FAITH BASICS

Faith's Object, Purpose, Reward, Source, and Challenge

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, August 26, 2007

Humankind was made for relationship with the Creator, but without faith there can be no relationship (only curiosity, uncertainty, dread, or indifference). The Bible says, "*The just shall live by faith*" (Galatians 3:11). No faith... no life, only the walking dead, the shell of a person, a hollow existence.

Jesus said, "*I have come that you might have life to the full*" (John 10:10). The fullness of life is faith. Faith is life's dynamic, the energy of living, life to the full.

No wonder Jesus said, "You must be born again." This is not an option where a full life is the goal.

What Real Faith Is NOT

Yet the topic of faith — so vital to our spiritual well-being — is subject to much confusion and misinterpretation. The tragedy is that when faith becomes mired in confusion, its life and power are dissipated. All that remains is the form of religion, without the power of God.

James 2:19 *You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror.*

The devil is very religious, but he is not saved. He believes, but he does not trust and follow. One can have belief, yet not have faith, for *real faith* is not mental agreement alone; it is heart trust with obedience.

Real faith is not a religious tradition or style, not a great revelation or experience, not a feeling or a mindset.

Real faith is a response, an action — it is hearing a word from God and responding to it with trust and obedience.

Real Faith's Object

Real faith must have an object — something or someone in whom I trust. It is not faith in me or faith in faith or faith in prayer or in good works. Real faith begins with faith in God.

But faith in God is only "entry-level" faith.

John 14:1 *Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me.*

Faith in God is a starting point, but faith in Jesus is the objective; that is, faith in a person — One who is living, caring, attentive, involved, and capable. And since Jesus is the Living Word, real faith is also faith in God's written word, the Bible, the expression to man of God's heart and mind.

Your faith's value is drawn from its object. If the object of your faith is your good works, then it is only as valuable as your works are good. And God has said that our good works are altogether insufficient; they lend us little to no assurance.

On the other hand, if the object of your faith is the living person, Jesus Christ, and you follow in His steps, then your relationship with God will be like His relationship with God, and the final result of your faith will be like His.

Real Faith's Purpose

What was His relationship with God like? Jesus was keenly aware of God, and of a resultant purpose in His own life. At the age of twelve, about the time a boy begins to become a man, He said, *"I must be occupied with my Heavenly Father's business."*

The purpose of real faith in my life is not "my will be done," but His. Jesus taught us that very clearly by His own example, when He faced His execution on the cross and prayed in the garden, *"Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine"* (Luke 22:42).

Real faith's purpose is always what God wants; and if what I want is different, then faith leads me to choose what He wants instead.

The purpose of real faith in my life also is not "my way be done" but His.

A man was trapped in his home by a flash flood. He climbed to his rooftop to escape the rising waters, and began to pray: "God, I believe in You! You rescue those who call upon Your name. So, I am calling and I believe You will rescue me." About that time, a large, fallen tree bumped into the house as it was carried along in the current, but the man pushed it away with his feet until it drifted off. The man finished his prayer, "I thank You, Lord, that you will rescue me."

Soon, a man in a motorboat saw him on his roof and offered his help, but the man on the rooftop sent him away, saying, "No, thanks, God will save me." A long while later a helicopter pilot spotted the man, when the water level had reached his ankles and attempted to rescue him, but the man waved the pilot away, shouting, "No need, God will save me!" In a few hours the water level swept the man from the rooftop and he drowned.

Waking up in a Heaven, He cried to the Lord, "Savior, why did you not rescue me when I prayed for deliverance from the flood?"

God said, "What did you want? I sent a log, a boat, and a helicopter!"

Isaiah 55:8 "My ways are far beyond anything that you could imagine. ⁹ For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.

Real faith's purpose is *what* God wants, in the *way* God wants to do it.

Real Faith's Reward

Most biblical rewards are for things we *do* and they are reserved for us in Heaven. But the reward of real faith is both eternal and immediate.

It is an immediate and enduring relationship with Christ, as Forgiver and Friend, Leader and Helper. And it is an eternal salvation from the damage and destruction of sin.

John 11:25 Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. ²⁶ Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die. Do you believe this, Martha?"

1 Peter 1:9 The reward for trusting him will be the salvation of your souls.

There are answers to prayer: "Then Jesus said to the disciples, 'Have faith in God. 23 I tell you the truth, you can say to this mountain, "May you be lifted up and thrown into the sea," and it will happen. But you must really believe it will happen and have no doubt in your heart. 24 I tell you, you can pray for anything, and if you believe that you've received it, it will be yours'" (Mk 11:22-24).

And, above all, real faith is its own reward:

Hebrews 11:1 Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see.

Faith brings confidence and assurance, peace (Philippians 4:6-7), fulfillment (John 6:35), clarity and focus. Mind you, real faith *is not* these things, but they are the *results* of real faith; they are its immediate fruits.

Real Faith's Source

So how do we get real faith, and how can it grow? Just one way:

Romans 10:17 Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

Real faith comes by hearing; that is, by understanding — understanding God's character and purpose. The more you dwell on and comprehend the character and purpose of God in this world and your life, the stronger your faith will become.

How can we get that understanding? Through the message about Christ — the Word of God, the Bible.

When you read the Bible, do you *get it*? Until you "get it" you have no understanding, and therefore, no faith comes in that area. If you don't read it, you cannot understand it. But, reading it alone — without contemplation and revelation — is fruitless. More knowledge (without understanding) only gives you a big head.

Really hearing (with understanding) can be exciting, but it is always humbling, because it pushes "my will" and "my way" to the background.

Faith is not a fruit, but a gift:

Ephesians 2:8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

You may pray for faith to be given, but you must follow-through by spending time in the Word, so faith may come. And you may pray that your faith will increase, but you must follow through by practicing what you already understand. Like a muscle, faith grows by using it. And, like body building exercise, growing faith means working through pain.

Real Faith's Challenge

Many things challenge our faith. To begin with, we are challenged when God says, "No," to our requests. We imagine that our heart is good and our mind is in tune with His, but the truth is that God is so much bigger than we are. We will never fully comprehend Him!

Romans 11:33 Oh, how great are God's riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is for us to understand his decisions and his ways!³⁴ For who can know the Lord's thoughts? Who knows enough to give him advice?

Our faith is challenged when others are blessed instead of us, and when we see those who have behaved wickedly prosper. (Read Psalm 73.)

Delays challenge our faith, as do setbacks, reverses, and hardships. We may pursue a course that we believe God has directed, and initially everything falls into place appearing to confirm that it *is* His will, but then, inexplicably, progress stalls. What gives? Our faith is being tested: His will or ours? His way or ours? His timing or ours?

Well-meaning unbelievers who, nevertheless, do not understand God's will for our lives may challenge our faith's practice, warning us not to "go overboard." This, too, tests our faith.

Our faith is challenged by contrary teachings, which produce confusion. Lies and distortions of the truth only intensify our perplexity.

James 1:3 When your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow.⁴ So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything.

I will address this topic more fully next week, but the bottom line is this: *You don't know if you have real faith until it's been tested.*

When things work smoothly, you may feel confident of your direction, but when plans are upset, or you "hit a wall" — that is when you find out where your faith really is.

God has bigger plans for you than simply making things work smoothly; He's molding your heart and mind to be like Jesus! Trust Him.