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Presentation Transcript
The Faithful Christian, Part 4 – Growing Faith
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There was a man in the Bible whose son was afflicted by an evil spirit. You can read about the event in Mark 9. He took his son to Jesus, and said, “If you can do anything, have compassion on us and heal him.” And Jesus said, “If you can? All things are possible for those who believe.” The man, in emotional agony over his poor son’s condition, cried out, “I believe. Help my unbelief!”

This story highlights the condition many people are in. We believe, but we know we need to believe more – to have more faith, in order for miracles to occur. So how does one grow in faith? Is it an accident that people increase in faith? Or, something that God does on the sly to us that we don’t notice? Or, are there things we can intentionally do to augment God’s efforts to develop us as faith-based people?

So, the question today is: How does a person grow in faith? This presentation is the fourth in our series called *The Faithful Christian*.

What is faith? We’ve talked about it already, but it’s been awhile, so a refresher here for this fourth part in the series. Well, I’ve seen a lot of definitions of faith. “A strong belief in the gospel” was one definition I read. “The absence of doubt,” or “belief in God.” But the definition that really helps me get a handle on it is found in Hebrews 11 – the Faith Chapter. In Hebrews 11:1, Paul says:

Hebrews 11:1 – *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. The King James translates that somewhat more forcefully. It says: Faith is the evidence of things hoped for.*

The man’s son was not yet healed, but he brought him to Jesus in *hope* of it. But he was not as *convicted* as he needed to be, and he knew that. He said, “Help my unbelief.” So he was totally honest.

So faith stands in the place of physical evidence. Paul says in verse 3:

V-3 – *By faith we understand that the universe was created by the Word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.*

Now, I believe that God created the heavens and the earth. I think most Christians do that as well. But can I show physical evidence of a creation process, or even an event? No. But I can look up at the sky at night and understand where it came from, because that's what the Bible tells us we ought to be able to do – faith in God in place of scientific evidence. As long as things like the creation or belief that the Bible is from God are an issue, I don't have much trouble having faith. Now I know other people have more trouble about that and maybe less issues about other parts of faith than I do, so I'm *not* saying, "I'm better." I'm just saying, "I've noticed that it doesn't seem to bother me at all to look up at the sky and acknowledge God is the Creator of all this." When you look at it, it's the only reasonable choice a person can make. But when it comes down to what God will do for *me*, well, that's where it gets a little harder for me – and, I think also, for most people.

So the man in the story, when he realized he needed more faith, *asked* for it. He said, "Help my unbelief." So that's one of the main things we can do to increase faith. We can ask God for it. And I'm not talking about casually, but to go on a vigil, where we ask God every day for a while, and we talk about our faith, and we ask Him to help us understand it, and help unbelief. People tend to have ambivalence about these things – feelings both directions. I think it was James that said, "Don't be a double-minded person." You know, "Get on God's side." So that's one of the main things we can do – we can *ask* for faith.

Notice that, after he asked Jesus for faith, Jesus healed his son. He didn't say, "Bless you, my son, I'll give you faith," or anything like that. But I think we can assume that Jesus gave him the faith he needed for his son to be healed. And we all know that our faith is going to be tested. That's a promise from God. So we can ask God to give us enough faith to meet the test and to let the test help us become stronger in it.

I'm a big believer, as I get older, in what is called *intentionality* – to intentionally think about developing more faith and having prayers about it on a regular basis – or maybe, like a prayer vigil about it. God *wants* to give us good things – to be successful in our Christianity, and to live a good life. And Paul said, "We can't please God without faith," so we *need* faith in order to be successful Christians. And He *wants* us to be that, so I think it's a pretty good chance that, if we ask God for more faith, He will give it to us. He's more than willing to give us good things.

You know, in just thinking about it, in a way, then, a lack of faith keeps God from giving us many of the things we want. So that's another way to think about it. Jesus really wanted to heal that man's son, and He wanted to heal a lot of other people too, and He wanted to do a lot of

things for His disciples, but they didn't have enough faith to receive them. So, a lack of faith, again, prevents us from receiving many things that God wants to give us. So there's another reason why we ought to ask Him for more.

I have a friend who told me this story – it's probably been 30 years ago now. He needed a watch for his work and he didn't have the money to buy one. I think it was a specific kind of watch, if I remember correctly. But times were tough for him and he didn't have the money buy the tools he needed – that were expected of him to have – to do his work. So he told God what he needed and why. He went into great detail about the brand and the model – all of that. And then he asked God to put it in a red box so he would know it was his when it arrived. And then he went about his business, expectantly waiting to receive his watch. And, within a week, there it was – red box and all. I don't recall the details about how God delivered it. I don't think he went into a jewelry store, and saw a red box on a counter, and just assumed it was his, and walked out without paying for it. I think there was some really logical way he knew it was his and all of that. And I don't recall what kind of watch it was – the story has faded in my mind – but I know that I did see the watch on his arm, and it struck me that it must have been quite expensive. Now this man is not prone to lying or hyperbole, so I believe he was telling the truth about that. And I also learned that, in telling me that story, he was given to thanksgiving and giving credit where credit was due, rather than lying and hyperbole. He was telling his story to praise God for this blessing. He wasn't boasting about that he was so good that God gave him something, or that he had God's ear and God did what he wanted. He was so thankful he couldn't not talk about it.

So we ask, "Why does God do things like this?" I think most of us know people, or can tell these stories ourselves, about unusual things that have turned up for us. What we wonder is what made God do it this time, when other times the answer is, "No." Well, I don't think we think there's a way to know the answer to that. Sometimes, I think He does things just because He can and He knows that we'd like to have things. He's a gracious God.

So let's move on from there. If we look at the rest of the Faith Chapter, Paul illustrates how faith makes a difference in our lives and how it does that. So let's look. After Paul tells us about Abel and Enoch and Noah – in Hebrews 11 – and also Abraham and Sarah, he makes this point in Hebrews 11:13.

Hebrews 11:13 – *These all died in faith, not having received the things promised* – so when we ask for a watch in a red box, we may get it, but we may die first. I mean, God does not think about time the way we do – *but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return.* So he's saying, "Haran" – or wherever it was...Ur of the Chaldees is where Abraham started, right? – so, if he'd been thinking about going there, he could have turned around any time he wanted to. But he was looking for

something better, he said in verse 16: *But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.*

So all these people believed God would give them an eternal inheritance with Him – eternal life, the Kingdom of God. These are the terms that we use today to talk about it. And that belief – belief in God’s promise that He promised to do that for them, if they would follow Him – that changed the way they lived their lives.

And he goes even further. He talks about Isaac, and Jacob, and Joseph, and Moses’ mother, who hid him in the reeds for three months, and Moses himself, who march a nation through a sea on the belief that God was at work with them. He spoke of Joshua, who followed God’s instruction to the tee when besieging Jericho, and Rahab, who was a prostitute, but helped the spies that came to spy out the city before they attacked. Amazing stories of people who were driven to do what God told them to do out of a hope that there was something better in store for them, and also because they wanted to follow God and do His will.

But after he covers all of this, he really starts to get eloquent. And I want to read you a few verses now – Hebrews 11, starting in verse 32, moving toward the end of the chapter. He said:

Hebrews 11:32-40 – *And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets – who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two – we know that the prophet, Isaiah, was sawn in two by the king – they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated – of whom the world was not worthy – wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.*

So, he’s saying that they’re waiting in the grave until God’s plan is to be completed, and the saints are to be resurrected. So, a pretty eloquent picture – in his mind, I’m sure – a person, or people, connected to each one of these descriptors. So we see this vast number of people doing unbelievable things because of their faith. See, it’s not really about a watch in a red box. It’s about believing that God promises us that we will live forever with Him. This is where hope comes in. This chapter tells us that all these faithful people had this great hope – a hope of eternal life – a city whose builder and maker is God – an eternal city – life with God as God. Paul himself said, “As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive.”

So what point am I making here? Well, hope drives us toward the goal God has offered. You know, I think sometimes, I – and many other people that I talk to – get so caught up and wrought up in their own problems and things that they lose sight of what this really is all about – to be a Christian. We have got to stay focused on the goal – on what God is driving us toward and wants for us. So hope drives us toward the goal, and faith empowers us to seek it. Remember what we read a few weeks ago in Hebrews 11:6:

Hebrews 11:6 – *And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.*

So there's what faith does for us. It helps us *do* things that we need to do to get to the goal. Faith causes us to focus on what God has promised and seek Him out of hope. So all that said, doing things for God, living to seek God and follow Him also increases our faith. Faith causes us to do those things, but doing those things increases our faith.

How do I know that? Well, the same way most of the other old-timers I know, who have retained faith to this day. The more we live God's way and seek Him, the more sure we are that His way works best. And not that I have finished all the lessons I need on that, I think – I think we have a certain amount of days, and God's packing them full of lessons for us right up to the end – but the more we live God's way and seek him, the more sure we are that His way works best. And for those of you who are younger, look with at something Jesus said. It's in Matthew 6:25. He said:

Matthew 6:25 – *"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? And then He elaborates on that for quite a while, and then in verse 31, he says:*

V-31-33 – *Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. So, focus on the goal and all these things will be added to you.*

I was at a summer camp once, and there was a young man – just married, was one of the staff – and he was talking to some of the campers one day – teaching a lesson, I think. And he said that earlier in his young adulthood, he said, “I really need to work and make money for college,” so I’ll pray and study my Bible more later.” Then he said, “While I’m in college, I need to study hard and get good grades, so I’ll pray and build a relationship with God later.” And after he got out of college, the same thing with finding a job. Then he kind of struck out on finding someone to marry. And there he was married, and he said, “It wasn’t until that happened that I realized I had everything backwards.” He said, “Once I started focusing on God and His righteousness, all

of these things were added to me.” So I thought that was a very eloquent, living example of exactly what Jesus is talking about. And He concluded by saying:

V-34 – *“Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”* You know, if you want to worry about something, worry about doing a good job right now.

Now I have not done all of this perfectly, but I have been anxious long enough to see things work out over and over again, so that I don’t worry about small stuff quite as much as I used to. And all we have to do is do what God says – seek Him first and everything’s going to fall into place eventually. So that learning by doing, and then experiencing the results of it, helps us to become stronger in faith. So, take a chance and see what happens. Do what God says, and then look for the city in the sky coming down out of heaven for us. That’s going to happen. And that’s what God tells us to do, and then doing it increases our faith even more.

Have you ever tried tithing? When I first heard about that, my first response was, “Well, I can’t do that.” You know, I didn’t make enough money, and I had too many expenses, and blah, blah, blah. Well, just try it and see what happens. God Himself even challenges us to try it. In Malachi 3:10, he says:

Malachi 3:10 – *Bring the full tithe – a tithe means ten percent – the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.*

So there it is. It’s right there. That would be one of the things that a person could do to build their faith. Because what’s going to happen is, after you get adjusted – you just adjust your outgo back ten percent, so that you can afford to pay your tithes, and then you go on – and after a while, you begin to notice that you’re not lacking anything from giving that money to God. In fact, you have probably *more* than you would have had. So blessings will start to come your way financially.

I know when I just out of high school, I got a job – a really good job for somebody right out of high school, working at Stanford Research Institute – and it was really going to be great fun job. The first thing they did on the job was give us hard hats, and company drivers’ licenses, and keys to a company car, and sent me and my partner all over the Bay Area, picking up parts that they needed to build a radio telescope antenna that was going to be 86 feet across. And we got to help put that together. The whole part of it was based on what was called the torque tube, which the center section that all the struts, that held the wire, and made the big dish – that part was being made, as I recall, in San Jose by a big fabrication house. And after a week of work, our boss called us in – the engineer that designed the whole project – the whole antenna – and said, “Well, they’re telling us the torque tube isn’t ready, so we may have to lay you off until it comes in. So, I’d already been accepted to Ambassador College, and I was trying to save money to go there. So

I went home and I told God I was putting Him to the test, because I was tithing on the money I was making, and I was expecting Him to somehow take care of me. I didn't hear any calls over the weekend that I shouldn't come in, so I came in Monday morning – me and my partner were there – and our boss said, “You'll be happy to know that the torque tube came in on Saturday, and so now we may need you to work overtime.” So just like that...one prayer. People say, “Well, maybe it just came in.” Well, maybe it did, but I know I prayed, and I know what God said He was going to do, and that happened. So that was one of the things that really got my attention when I first got started.

And, you know, we could all go on and on with a hundred examples of stories about how well-trusting God works. I have many more, and I'm sure you do, too – probably even better ones than I just told, but let's move to something else that increases faith. Besides asking God for it, and besides acting on it and starting to obey God, what else is there?

Well, we saw that faith drives us to obey God. And there is a great scripture about that. It's in 1 John 3:2. He said:

1 John 3:2 – *Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared* – in other words, God's told us that we're going to be with Him and we're going to be like Him, but we don't know what that's like – *but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.*

So everybody that has the hope purifies himself like God is pure. We follow Jesus out of that hope. So that's a really powerful thing. You know, all the poor people that think we don't have to obey God's law – and I'm not talking about the letter of the law; I'm talking about the *spirit* of it that Jesus talked about in the New Testament. We all have to do that. I mean, this is a way you can identify people that really have that hope in them. They are trying to be like Christ in their everyday life because of that hope. That hope is the target for faith. So it's a *living* faith, demonstrated by good works to those who have it. And where does that lead? Living faith... James said, “Some people say, ‘I'll show you my faith,’ and others say, ‘I'll show you my works,’” and he said, “I'll show you my faith by my works.” And that is living faith.

So where does that lead? Well, we saw that the Bible is filled with names of people of faith, who were driven by it to follow God's lead – to obey Him. So living faith leads to active obedience – not just talking about obeying God, but *actually* tithing, *actually* keeping the Sabbath, *actually* following the commandments of God and trying to live it in the spirit, and live their life the way Jesus lived Him. Active obedience. Living faith...active obedience.

And where does that lead? Well, let's read what John said about that in 1 John 2:3.

1 John 2:3 – *And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says, "I know him," but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.* And that causes the love of God to be perfected in us.

So you have living faith, which leads to active obedience, and active obedience leads to spiritual love. And interestingly enough, spiritual love can also lead to active obedience. It's a circle! So what does that mean? Well, it means that we can enter the circle at any one of the points and it will always lead us to the other two – because it's a circle. You're going to go that route.

In my own case, I entered in at the obedience part. I was seventeen. No one else that I knew believed the way that I did, but I learned a different way to live life from studying the Bible. And I encountered the Sabbath, and prayer, and fasting, and the other commandments and I had never done any of that stuff. So that was what my focus was on – where my energy was. I needed to learn how to do those things. And that led me to understand what Jesus Christ had done for me. I had been confirmed in the Episcopal Church when I was thirteen, and I never really understood about Christ's sacrifice. I think I was just too young for it at that time. Now other kids may say, "I learned that when I was ten." Okay, so you were more advanced than I was. I was, I think, somewhat diminished about those things back then. But that led me to understand what Jesus Christ had done for me. And I was just blown away by it. God loved *me* in spite of all my sins and all my mistakes. And that led me to believe in God, which is faith.

And then other people I've talked to entered in at the love point. Their parents were devout Christians, and they loved God, and eventually, their children loved God too, and that empowered them to trust God, which is faith, which leads to their obedience later.

When I went to college, I met people who had come to God without the help of family, like I had, but they were not focused on obedience at first, but on faith. They learned first about the Kingdom of God and God's promises of faith. And that's what caught their attention and their focus.

So interesting. Though we all entered the circle at different points, we all entered it, and we all have been the recipients of a measure of living faith, active obedience and spiritual love. So God knows we're all different. He made us that way. He knows we all focus on different things by nature. So our life with Him has many entry points of focus. And whichever one is the one that catches our attention, we always wind up at the same place all together. And that would be a group of obedient, loving, faithful people. Now, I'm not sure that quite describes me at every point, but I'm working on it, and God is working on me with it. So it's just something to wonder about and be thankful for, as we continue on our trip through the issue of faith in this series.

Don't forget to look us up on the Website. There are lots of good things to consider there.

Until next time, this is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families and the Church of God.