

How to Grow in Faith

by

Roger Smalling

I thought a good twenty year stretch on the mission field would make me a high invincible man of faith and power. Though I've learned a lot, I still encounter areas of weakness.

Ministry has a way of drilling faith into a person. Faith or failure confronts us often. Difficult circumstances have made me a reluctant student at times, and I've occasionally felt more like a draftee than a volunteer.

I cringe to hear some preachers declare their strong faith in brash tones. NONSENSE! In private talks with such people, I find in them the same fears and frustrations that assault the rest of us.

An evangelist once shared with me his difficulty in believing God for finances. This humble confession blessed me and prompted a discussion on how our mutual strengths compensate each other's weaknesses. In our era of positive thinking, such a confession is out of vogue. Yet the Bible supports it.

Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. James 5:16

Faith is a fine tuned thing. I have a short wave radio at home, and if I want to get a certain station, it has to be dead on. Close is not enough. Faith is like that. People customarily use the word "faith" to describe other attitudes that mimic faith. They remain unproductive. Faith has counterfeits. So it is essential to make some distinctions.

Faith and Planning Work Together

Take a look at Luke 22:35-36.

And He said to them, "When I sent you without money bag, knapsack, and sandals, did you lack anything?" So they said, "Nothing." Then He said to them, "But now, he who has a money bag, let him take it, and likewise a knapsack; and he who has no sword, let him sell his garment and buy one.

Jesus establishes two levels of faith here. First, He sent the disciples on a

faith adventure. No money, no extra clothes. Just go out and preach, guided by the Spirit, and God will take care of you. It worked!

However, after they returned, Jesus said something surprising: *"But **now** I say to you. . .*

Why the change? He was teaching them that going out under God's special guidance without ordinary preparation was an unusual exercise in faith. But ordinary Christian living is different. The daily life of faith entails adequate planning under the guidance of the Spirit, and then trusting God to make His plans work.

New missionaries may fall into this trap. Some go out with inadequate support, "just believing God." It intrigues me how they wind up poor. God sees them through with a few precious miracles of divine supply. Yet He cannot encourage this philosophy indefinitely. Good planning under the Spirit's leading, is the higher level of faith.

God's miraculous supply of manna for His people in the desert was the norm at that time. Yet the Jews were there only because of their unbelief.

What happened when they finally entered the Promised Land? The manna stopped! God's supply came through the ordinary means of crops and harvest. This, not the desert, is the life of faith.

Pastors frequently have difficulty with board members who misunderstand this principle. Someone suggests, "Let's have a building project!" Another replies, "Well, what kind of building and how are we going to pay for it?" The response is, "Let's just start building by faith!"

I know a church in Texas that decided to build a Sunday School complex by this kind of "faith." They bought materials and went out behind the church and started digging a foundation. No blueprint. No budget. Pretty soon, along came the police asking, "Where is your building permit?" End of project. Since then, they sought God for a plan, and are now moving ahead again.

Faith is Active

The opposite error to leaping ahead without planning, is to do nothing. Passive personalities occasionally fall into this trap. They assume that faith is merely a quiet confidence in God that requires no activity on their part. Though they may imagine their faith to be strong, they might only be

practicing passivity.

Christians may shy away from James chapter 2, fearing the error of salvation by works. Yet James' affirmation that "*faith without works is dead*" reveals an essential truth. We must distinguish between mere mental assent and the activity of true faith. Works activate faith. Without them, faith remains sterile.

Notice how God sent water to King Jehosaphat in II Kings 3:16-17. God had them pick up shovels and dig some ditches first. Cannot God dig His own ditches? He wanted them to demonstrate the genuineness of their faith. The right order is important here. God first gave the promise, and then the work to go along with it. Nobody said, "Let's dig some ditches and see if God fills them." That would be acting in foolishness rather than faith.

With healing, finances or other needs, we sometimes make this mistake. God frequently requires an act of faith, before the answer comes. He might stipulate that a believer give a certain quantity of money as a step of faith. Let's "dig our ditches" only when God tells us to.

Faith Is Superior To Hope

Even Hell might be tolerable if it had hope. We should never minimize this important virtue. Hope is a vague expectation that something good might happen in the future. Faith, however, is a present tense affair. It counts a promise of God as a legally accomplished fact.

People live in hope for years, without results, imagining they are exercising faith. How tragic! Standing on the promises of God could transform hope into productive faith.

A good way to expose this difference is to ask a person, "What has God said to you about the matter?" A blank stare reveals that the person is standing in hope, not faith, and needs teaching.

Pragmatic Americans make similar mistakes, but in a more subtle way. We decide to give "faith" a try, in the hopes that it might work. If it doesn't, the gospel gets the blame! Those who "try" faith must understand that they have none. We cannot "try" faith. Either we believe God or we do not.

What turns hope into faith? Only a promise from God can do that. I encourage new converts to expect promises from God out of the Word, and

periodically review them. Without a grasp of divine promises, a Christian gets nowhere spiritually.

The life of Abraham illustrates this clearly. He wanted a son long before God gave him the promises. He hoped that one day Sarah would conceive. But when the promise came, he had more to stand on than mere hope, His hopes changed into unwavering faith.

Trying to have faith without a promise from God is an exercise in frustration. That amounts to hope only, and hope has no real substance to it. Faith gives substance to hope. So says the writer of Hebrews 11:1- *"..faith is the substance of things hoped for . . .*

The context of the previous Chapter confirms this. In Hebrews 10:36-39, We are exhorted to stand on the promises of God. This turns hope into faith, as with Abraham.

Faith Is Not A Matter of Personality or Temperament

He who has charm walks an apparently smooth road. For the rest of us, it's a fight all the way. Charm is a wonderful thing if God controls it. Disaster follows when the devil uses, particularly if the charmer is in the pulpit.

When charmers get into the ministry, they can develop a blindly loyal following. Everything they do appears right. Their errors are excused, their opinions lauded and they are deemed wise, regardless of what they say. For years I've been puzzled how they do it. Though we might envy their charm, we can take comfort in this: Charm moves people, but faith moves mountains.

Some preachers develop an entertaining rhetorical style. This causes many to accept their views without thought. Confidence in a man quickly replaces sound Biblical study.

Similar to the charmers are the preachers who imagine that strong opinions and dogmatic affirmations are an aspect of faith. When a person makes strong assertions about faith, ask yourself if he really has facts equivalent to the force of his statements.

Strong personalities often seem very sure about the will of God for others, and push people in directions contrary to God's will. Submitting to this is not faith. It might work for a while, but God wisely hinders it in the long run.

Similarly, evangelists with a genuine gift of faith may be impatient with

those who do not experience the same. Take a dash of strong will, sprinkle on a bit of intemperate temper, spread on a dash of zeal without knowledge, and you have a potent concoction that injures the weak.

True faith makes us determined, but determination is not necessarily faith. We've seen many a minister or missionary plunge ahead "by faith," with a determined will. After creating a mess, they cry to God for help and He bails them out. Then in retrospect they justify their decisions because things worked out after all. They thought that they were moving in faith, but they were really moving in their own spirit by folly.

Strong willed Christians must distinguish the difference between faith and the exercise of their strong will. Isaiah warned:

In the day thou shalt make thy plant to grow, and in the morning shalt thou make thy seed to flourish, but the harvest shall be a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow. Isaiah 17: 11

Once my father heaped fertilizer on our garden tomato plants. He was determined to make them produce an abundant crop. Instead, it killed them. He learned that we cannot force gardens to grow.

God wants us to plant seeds of faith; not stomp them into the ground. Plants should be carefully watered but not flooded. Faith must be built with patience, not strong will and charm.

Faith Is Humble, Not Presumptuous

Presumption is the most dangerous counterfeit of faith. It resembles faith very closely. The difference is in the revealed will of God.

The Israelites learned this the hard way in the desert when they "*went presumptuously up into the hill*" to fight their enemies (Deuteronomy 1:43). What was wrong with that? They had fought enemies before and won. Why not this time also? Surely God would understand their intentions and overlook His orders not to go! The Amorites came out "*and chased them like bees*" and defeated them.

The only real difference between this incident and their previous battles, was the will of God in the timing and method. Yes, God wants us to win our battles, according to His strategy, not ours.

Presumption occurs in two ways: Either acting because of another's experience, or by confusing the difference between a universal promise and

its private application.

What then is a good definition of faith? Faith is an active dependence upon God's ability to accomplish His revealed will. Faith then, contains three elements:

1. It is grounded on a promise of God.
2. It is active, not passive.
3. It is dependent, not presumptuous.

If any of these three elements is missing, it is an unproductive counterfeit, not faith at all.

Faith is connected to our whole being. It works by love, moves with patience, and walks in humility.