

Fight the Good Fight of the Faith

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Last week we wrapped up our 8 month look at the Exodus story which, as we saw, was one giant call to faith as summarized in the commission of Joshua found in Joshua 1:1-9. In this commission we were challenged to have faith in God's future grace because we have experienced His past grace. We were challenged to have faith in God's future grace because we know God's word. Most importantly, we were challenged to have in God's future grace because we personally know God Himself.

As we saw, this was not just an Old Testament theme but rather is found throughout the New Testament. The Apostle Paul received this call to a faith which bears fruit;

^{NIV} **1 Timothy 1:12** I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service... ¹⁴ The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Paul then called Timothy to the same thing;

^{NIV} **1 Timothy 1:18** Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, ¹⁹ holding on to faith and a good conscience ...

^{NAS} **1 Timothy 6:12** Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

What God has called us to is not easy;

^{NIV} **1 Timothy 1:19** holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith.

Paul himself struggled with this;

^{KJV} **1 Timothy 1:15** This *is* a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.

We should note that when he says "I am chief" he is using a present active indicative verb which indicates a continuous action. In other words Paul is not saying he *was previously* the chief of sinners but that he *continues to be* the chief of sinners. Paul discussed in detail his ongoing struggle with sin, the battle between the Spirit and the flesh, between faith and unbelief, in Romans 7 where he lamented his personal weakness but rejoiced in the strength and victory that is ours in Christ through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. This has been the testimony of the stalwarts of the faith throughout Church history; people like Augustine, Jonathan Edwards, Andrew Gunton Fuller, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and many others. If those considered by many to be pillars of faith struggled to live in light of their calling it is no surprise that we do too. The good news is that although struggles are inevitable, we can and should be victorious.

Several weeks ago our bulletin cover contained a piece by Paul J. Twist entitled *Lift Up Your Eyes to the Lord* which addressed this very topic. Twist wrote;

“God’s creatures can sometimes be illustrations of important truths. If a buzzard is placed in a small pen, it will be totally imprisoned, even though the pen is not covered. Despite their ability to fly, buzzards always run at least ten feet before taking off, and without that space to run, they will not even attempt to fly.

The ordinary bat cannot take off from a level place. If placed on flat ground or on a floor, it can only shuffle around helplessly until it comes to a slight elevation from which to launch itself into the air, where it is then able to fly with remarkable agility.

A bumblebee, if dropped into an open tumbler, will be there until it dies, because it cannot see the means of escape at the top. Instead, it will persist in trying to find a way out through the sides near the bottom, seeking a way where none exists.

People are in many ways like the buzzard, the bat and the bumblebee. We struggle along with our problems and frustrations, never realizing all we have to do is look up to our heavenly Father for help.

In Psalm 121, the Psalmist looked to the hills for help. But he found the help he was seeking in the Lord, his Creator, not in the protection of the hills, nor in man’s power and wisdom.

In Isaiah 45:22, God invites us to ‘Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else.’”

As challenging as the call to faith is we can rest in the fact that God does not call us to anything for which He does not thoroughly equip us. In Philippians 2:12 Paul challenges us to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. Then one verse later he assures us with the promise that God is the working one in us enabling us to will and to do according to His good pleasure. We have the sure promises of God’s word that we can, by God’s grace, have victory over our struggles. If we can identify the chief sources of our struggles then we can progressively overcome them and walk in victory.

Do we struggle because our faith is too small? Do you ever feel like if you could just have more faith then everything would be okay and you would then walk in victory? This seems logical enough and there are many who preach this exact message. The problem is that this is wrong. An exchange between Jesus and His disciples clearly demonstrates the error in this way of thinking. In Luke 17 Jesus challenged His disciples to an extraordinary level of forgiveness;

^{NAS} **Luke 17:3** "Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. ⁴ "And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him."

Recognizing that humanly this was a nearly impossible challenge with which they were sure to struggle, they cried out to Jesus to increase their faith so that they could successfully meet His challenge;

^{NAS} **Luke 17:5** And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

The response of Jesus is shocking;

^{NAS} **Luke 17:6** And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and be planted in the sea'; and it would obey you.

In other words the smallness of their faith is not the problem. Their inability to forgive is not due to smallness of faith, Jesus proclaims that even tiny faith would be far more than enough to fulfill the challenge. So if the problem behind our struggles is not the size of our faith, then what is it? The Bible shows us that there are two main reasons that Christians struggle to live victorious lives of faith.

The first reason people struggle is because of a lack of knowledge of God's word. Scripture covers this matter from both a negative and a positive perspective. From a negative perspective, the lack of knowledge of God's word is catastrophic. Consider for example the warnings God delivered to the ancient Israelites;

^{NAS} **Isaiah 5:13** Therefore My people go into exile for their lack of knowledge...

^{NAS} **Hosea 4:6** My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge ...

The lack of knowledge of God's word is one of the most destructive forces possible in the life of a believer. We should note that both Isaiah and Hosea were addressing a willful lack of knowledge. The Israelites were not innocent victims, they had considerable access to the word of God and yet they willingly chose to be ignorant of it. This danger is every bit as present in the Church today, and like the ancient Israelites we are without excuse. The cover of a recent bulletin drives this point home;

What if we used the Bible as we use cell phones?

What if ...

- we carried it around in our pockets or purses?
- we turned back to get it if we forgot it?
- we accessed it several times a day?
- we used it to receive text messages?
- we treated it as if we couldn't live without it?
- we gave Bibles to our children as gifts?
- we shared it with others?
- we used it when traveling?
- we used it in case of emergency?

It may not be cell phones, it might be TV, or hobbies, or work, but for as busy as we may be we could find time for the word of God if knowing and pleasing God was truly something we were interested in. More encouragingly, Scripture does not merely give us warnings concerning the lack of knowledge of God's word, it also contains wonderful promises of the great blessings and benefits that come from a knowledge of God's word;

^{NAS} **Romans 10:14** How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? ... ¹⁷ So faith *comes* from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.

God has chosen the preaching of His word, made effectual through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, as the means through which He grants faith. Whether we have the word preached to us, or we read

it ourselves, the knowledge of the word of God can bear the fruit of faith. Not only is the word of God required to bring us to faith, it also sustains and increases our faith;

^{NAS} **Romans 1:16** For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes ...

Previously when we studied Romans we noted that “believes” here is not a verb but a participle, and specifically a present active participle. We discovered this meant two things. One is that the believing was ongoing and the second was that it was not merely an action which we do but is descriptive of our new nature in Christ. We saw that we could translate this expression literally as “all the believing ones”. In other words a true Christian is by their very nature a continually believing one. Saving faith is a present and abiding faith which flows from our very nature by the working of the Holy Spirit to the bearing of fruit. Notice it is to these *already* continually believing ones that the gospel is the power of God to salvation. The gospel message not only brought us to faith in the first place but now, for us as the continually believing ones, it is the power of God that sustains and increases our faith. It is the power of God that ensures our ongoing sanctification and which will ensure our final glorification. This sanctifying power of God is not limited to just the gospel message, it extends to all of Scripture from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation;

^{NIV} **2 Timothy 3:16** All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,¹⁷ so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

These promised blessings provide considerable motivation to grow in our knowledge of God’s word. We are not all called to be scholars and theologians, but we can all grow in our knowledge of God’s word, and we should never stop growing in it. We must keep in mind however that God’s word is not just trivia to fill our minds but rather it should be fuel to power our hearts. Knowing God’s word is a start but living in light of what we know is the goal because that is what sets us on the path to victorious living;

^{NAS} **Joshua 1:8** "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.

Knowing God’s word is critical, but this is not all there is to the story. Often we know God’s word, even specifically as it relates to our particular struggles, and yet we still struggle. The question is why, why do we still struggle? This brings us to the second reason we struggle.

The second reason we struggle to live lives of faith is because of persistent unbelief. Is this *really* possible for a Christian? Can a true believer suffer from unbelief? Can a person simultaneously have a genuine faith *and* unbelief? The short answer is yes. Consider for example the post-resurrection encounter Jesus had with his closest disciples;

^{NAS} **Mark 16:14** And afterward He appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining *at the table*; and He reproached them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who had seen Him after He had risen.¹⁵ And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.

At this point there was no questioning the genuineness of their faith and yet in spite of having genuine faith they were chastised for unbelief and hardness of heart. Then immediately after chastising the eleven, Jesus gave them the Great Commission and sent them on their way to preach the gospel. This demonstrates that the eleven disciples had a genuine faith so real they were tasked with initiating the spread of the gospel and yet they also struggled with an element of unbelief and hardness of heart. James would later address this very struggle between faith and unbelief;

^{NAS} **James 1:5** But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. ⁶ But let him ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, ⁸ *being* a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

This is the same internal war Paul wrote about in Romans 7. As long as we live on in this flesh, the Spirit will war against the flesh and faith will war against unbelief. Perhaps no passage in Scripture so clearly illustrates this struggle as the one recounting the interaction between Jesus and a father seeking healing for his child;

^{NAS} **Mark 9:23** And Jesus said to him, "If You can!" All things are possible to him who believes." ²⁴ Immediately the boy's father cried out and *began* saying, "I do believe *Lord*; help my unbelief."

To conclude, there are two things that will cause us to struggle to live the victorious lives of faith we are called to, one is a lack of knowledge of God's word and the second is our inherent double mindedness. Knowing this we can develop a general twofold strategy for success in our struggles: one, increase our knowledge of God's word; and two, identify the source of our unbelief and turn to God to help us eradicate it at its roots.

In the coming weeks we will apply this strategy to help us overcome the specific things Christians tend to struggle with. As we progress, empowered by God who is the working one in us, we can grow in our ability to practically live out the calling of 1 Timothy 6:12;

^{NAS} **1 Timothy 6:12** Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.