

Faith: Central to the Christ-like Journey

Greetings once again from Hong Kong and The Little Church World!

Over the last few weeks, I've been focusing on our journey to becoming more Christ-like. This is not a journey that we complete in this world, but is one that only ends when we leave this world and enter into the presence of the Lord, in heaven. How do we know we are going to enter His presence in heaven you might ask? The answer is that those of us who are Bible believers have a certainty that we will enter heaven because it's a promise made by Jesus Himself and what better source of a promise can we have than the Creator of the Universe.

One occasion this promise was made was during the Last Supper, when Jesus shared with his disciples that He was shortly to be betrayed and would then be leaving them. His disciples were deeply troubled by this and Jesus comforted them in the following words from John 14 verses 1 to 2: *Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?* (NIV)

We should also take note of the dialogue between Jesus and one of the criminals being crucified with Him. Luke 23 verse 43 reports the words Jesus spoke in response to the criminal who asked to be remembered by Jesus when he came into His Kingdom, a request of course that signified the criminal was acknowledging Jesus as Lord. Jesus' answer to him was: *Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.* (NIV)

These two examples and other Biblical statements confirm that Christ followers are assured that the end of their journey is heaven. Those reading this message, who have not yet given their lives to Christ, should understand that there is substantial evidence confirming the accuracy of the Bible as a record of Jesus's life and status as the Son of God and should read these statements with the authenticity of the Bible in mind.

Now, it's important to understand that statements such as these, made by the Lord God himself, do not apply exclusively to the twelve who were with Him when he lived on this earth or only to the criminal who was crucified with Him. These statements are made to all mankind, then and now, who have chosen to place Him at the centre of their lives. Those of us who are Christ followers are all his disciples, and the statement that Jesus made to his disciples during the Last Supper applies equally to his disciples here and now in the 21st century as it did to those around the table.

It is when we enter His presence in Heaven that our Christ-likeness journey is at an end. John McArthur, famous American pastor and writer puts it this way:

“Heaven is a place more wonderful than we can ever begin to imagine. It is a place of joy and beauty, of peace and happiness that will never end. Why? Because heaven is also a place where there will be no sin or suffering, no sorrow or pain. It's a place where there will be no quarrels or disagreements, no disappointments or weeping - because there will

be nothing there to make us sad. And in heaven we will never do anything to displease God.”¹

Returning to our main theme; namely, our journey on this earth to become more Christ-like, there is a fundamental aspect of our Christian walk which we have touched on in recent weeks but I feel deserves separate treatment because it's so central to our journey; this aspect is faith. I view faith as simply believing God's promises. I have called this in a previous message 'believing God not just believing in God'.

Believing God

In my view, believing God makes God personal to us. His promises are not general statements, but they are designed to apply to you and me personally. In fact, when Jesus departed this earth for heaven, he sent the Holy Spirit to be with us, to dwell inside our hearts and minds and to be our personal comforter, guide, advisor and conscience. Jesus confirmed this in John 14 verses 16 to 17 in the following statement: *I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever - the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.* (NIV)

For Christians, it is this Spirit of truth that makes God's promises real and personal. So, for example, it is this Spirit that will highlight a passage in the Bible that will speak directly into a Christ follower's situation. It is the same Spirit that will draw the Christian's attention to a promise contained in a Christian devotion or sermon that will give him or her peace and hope during difficult circumstances, and the wonderful thing about this is that God delivers on His promises. Evidence of God's track record on delivery of promises can be seen in terms of Biblical prophecies of the coming of Jesus. These prophecies are also promises for the future and over 300 prophecies made hundreds of years before Christ in the Old Testament, prophesied his birth, death and resurrection. In other words, God made over 300 promises at different times and in various circumstances that He would send Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and He kept all these promises when he sent His Son to die for us so that we could be reconciled to Him.

Now, this experience of the personal God; namely, believing God, is very different to a belief in God, although of course, the two positions are not mutually exclusive; in fact belief in God is a necessary condition for believing God. Nevertheless, I've observed a tendency to accept the former but stop short of the latter, and of course, the enemy will always feed our minds with reasons why we should stop short because, in reality, according to Satan, God is really not to be trusted. The Bible says differently. For example, if we really believe God, we believe the fundamental promise made by Paul in Romans 8 verse 38 to 39 where he states: *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.* (NIV)

¹ <http://www.gty.org/Resources/Articles/A302>

What a promise, and when we choose to take God literally at his word, the whole world of blessings opens up to us. What follows are just some of the blessings we have a right to expect as faith-filled Christ followers.

We can expect to be comforted by Him. Matthew 11 verses 28 to 30 reports Jesus' words as follows: *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.* (NIV)

What a joy it is to know that no matter how tough things seem to be in this world, we have the ultimate comforter in Jesus who is asking us to 'come to him'. In addition to comforting us, we also have a Lord who is ready to deliver us from the worst of our troubles. Paul puts it this way in 2 Corinthians 1 verses 9 to 10 as he relates some of his missionary trials: *Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us.* (NIV)

This same Lord is also the source of all provision. Philippians 4:19 confirms this as follows: *And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.* (NIV)

Those of us who take God at His word can also rest assured of his forgiving nature when we stumble and fall. Psalm 86 verse 5 states this clearly in the following words: *You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you.* (NIV)

Furthermore, in the Lord, we have the greatest of all 'life coaches'. Psalm 32 verse 8 reports the following statement from the Lord to those who follow Him: *I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you.* (NIV)

The Bible also confirms that God gives joy to his followers confirmed in Psalm 43:4 This is it: *Then will I go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight. I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God.* (NIV)

He also gives us a stable and consistent love as confirmed in Lamentations 3 verse 22 which tells us that: *The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases...* (ESV) and He gives us peace despite the trials of this world. This is conveyed to us in John 16:33 by Jesus Christ himself in the following words: *I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.* (NIV)

There are many more of God's promises that I could include in this message, but I hope you have gained just a flavour of the blessings you can expect as a follower of Christ. This expectation though is not a one-way arrangement, not just from God to man. God also has an expectation which is that we have total faith in Him. Hebrews 11:6 states this very clearly: *Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to*

him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (NIV)

John 3:16 also makes faith a condition of receiving the gift of eternal life in the following words: *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* (NIV)

Building Up Our Faith

Broken by Him

If you have not yet given your life to Jesus or as a Christian, you certainly believe in God but have stopped short of believing God, it may seem a tall order to exercise the type of faith needed to truly take God at his word. So, how do we develop the depth of faith that pleases God and attracts His blessings? The central issue is one of control. Believing God totally necessarily involves relinquishing control of our lives. For some, God wrestles control from us by bringing us spiritually and often physically to our knees, in other words, breaking us of all our feelings of self-control such that we have to call on Him as the only one we can turn to in our desperate state. Take it from me, this is a painful process and it is good if we have sufficient humility not to have to come to believe him by this route.

Feeding the Faith

A less painful process is to take steps to build up your faith. Faith needs to be fed and especially with the Christian faith, the enemy is always on the prowl to look for ways of diluting your faith and one way is by distracting you from regular bible reading. Make it a priority to read the word of God daily and believe me, this will have an effect of building up your faith because in reading the Bible, you engage the Spirit inside you with the Word of God and the effect is supernatural. Prayer, also, is central to this building process and engages you directly with God. In prayer, it is quite reasonable to ask Jesus to build up your faith. It will not be the first time He has been asked to do this. In Mark 9 verse 23 to 24 Jesus is asked by a possessed boy's father to help his son, and this is an extract of the dialogue between Jesus and the boy's father. Jesus begins by stating: *Everything is possible for one who believes. Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"* (NIV).

The father's openness and honesty resulted in him receiving Jesus' blessing for his son. Jesus loves authenticity and hates deception, lies and hypocrisy. We cannot hide our failings from Jesus, so we may as well acknowledge them and ask Jesus to fix us. He will do so gladly because this is all part of our Christian journey. Finally, if you are called by God into some new area or ministry in your life, and prayer, Bible reading and taking Christian counsel indicates this to be a call from God, then be obedient and take the necessary action. Obedience is closely associated with faith and will be the topic next week. However, for now, just realise that faith builds obedience and vice versa.

Summary

Let's me summarise today's message. Faith is at the core of Christianity, and it is an intense faith that is required to unleash God's promises and associated blessings. Some people need to be totally broken to be able to exercise true faith and believe God, but there's a less drastic way to build up our faith and that is by choosing to regularly read the Word and pray. Christ followers need to remember that they are on a Christian walk and there are challenges along the way. Total faith in God will sustain them in this walk. For those who have not yet given their lives to Jesus, I suggest you make a decision in favour of the Lord, even if you still have questions. When you do this, you will find that many of the questions you have are answered by the Lord because He will work in you directly as you interact with Him and fellow believers. There's a great future waiting for you whether, as a Christian, you have been reluctant to actually believe God or whether you have not yet placed God in the driver's seat of your life. Faith is the key to opening up that future. If you've not yet given your life to Jesus and you would like to do just that, please email (admin@thelittlechurchworld.org) and we will be glad to support you in your walk to the Lord. Now, all that remains for me to do now is to say goodbye and God bless and see you in a week's time with the next message which will focus on obedience.

Discussion Questions

1. If you are a Christ follower, describe what heaven will be like or if you are not yet a Christ follower, what do you think happens after you die? (Individual church/group members to give their own impressions/ideas?)
2. Why do some Christ followers believe in God but stop short of believing God?
3. What does the Christian concept of joy mean?
4. Why does God value faith so highly?
5. Building up one's faith requires that it be exercised. In what areas of your life could you exercise more faith in the Lord? (Question for individual church/group members)