

The Action of Faith

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Luke 22:31-34

And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. 32 But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren." 33 But he said to Him, "Lord, I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death." 34 Then He said, "I tell you, Peter, the rooster shall not crow this day before you will deny three times that you know Me."

Every Christian says he or she believes God and has faith in Him. But most Christians also complain that their faith is weak, even stale. We often feel like faith failures.

We read or hear about people who we characterize as people of great faith. Their stories both inspire and condemn us. We wish we could be more like them. We think how exciting it would be to be able to live by faith in everything, to believe God for everything. Yet, their testimonies confirm our experiments in faith as failures. We believe our faith will rise no higher than it is now.

The problem that Christians have with faith is two-fold. First, we make the mistake of totally spiritualizing faith or, secondly, we completely remove the mystery out of it and make faith entirely about believing what we think is true. Let me explain.

What do I mean spiritualizing faith? Isn't faith a spiritual thing?

What I mean by that statement is that we make faith to be entirely something God zaps you with, a supernatural surge of power given to you that you can feel. We remove all human responsibility for faith. There is no dispute that God does give to some greater measures of His grace, and they seem to excel in faith more than others. But that doesn't mean faith is always miraculous or spectacular. Faith is not a jolt of heaven's power; faith is obeying God. Often genuine faith looks very mundane.

But we, who wrongly define faith, don't believe that. We believe if we have faith we should see miracles daily or at least weekly. We over-spiritualize it to the spectacular and the sensational. But faith is for the ordinary. The just shall live by faith. Do you realize that your Lord Jesus spent 90 percent of His life without one miracle? Ninety percent of Jesus' life was unattended with miracles. You wouldn't say He lived without faith for those first 30 years of life. He learned that faith was as much for the mundane as it is for the miraculous.

And what do I mean that for others faith merely believes something to be true? I mean that they make faith entirely about head knowledge, learning certain facts and agreeing with those points. Some believe that if they believe something to be true and they think that is faith. "If I believe that to be true then I have faith." Faith, to them, is a mere knowledge that something is true. It is nothing more than mental agreement with a fact. But this too is wrong because what if the fact believed is not true but a falsehood? If the knowledge you possess is false, then your faith will not be based on true reality. And should the knowledge be true and factual, that doesn't mean you have faith. Remember, the devils believe that God is real, but they don't exercise faith in God. Just because something is true and you believe it to be true, does not mean you have faith. That's not what faith really is.

This is where we find our subject today. Peter believed he believed. But faith in faith will never get you through the big test. Faith in faith never gets you through the trial. That's the kind of faith Peter had in Jesus. He believed that he believed. He thought something was true, but he really didn't believe it, so he failed. He denied the Lord Jesus Christ three times.

I propose that this morning we analyze Peter's faith failure. But before we do that let's arrive, once again, at a definition of faith. We have to understand what faith is to realize that Peter's faith was flawed and how he ended up failing the Lord.

I. Simple Definition of Faith

We need a definition of the word faith. Whether you believe in God or not, you exercise faith. Everybody has faith. If someone says to me, "I don't have any faith at all," I would say, "That's not true." There's no way you can live without faith. You cannot cope with reality without it. There is, in every human being, the ability to exercise trust, faith, belief in something or someone.

What is faith?

To reduce faith to the simplest definition: Faith is acting like something is real.

You interact with what you think is reality and act accordingly. Therefore, faith in God is seeing what God sees as real and acting accordingly.

A. Faith Sees.

If you have faith in God, you are seeing God's reality as He sees it and you're acting as if that is true. There are two aspects to reality: the visible and invisible. The material realm we can see and the immaterial realm we cannot see. Just because you can't see something doesn't mean it's not real. We believe there are certain things that we cannot see that are real. The law of gravity, which we will illustrate with several times this morning, I can't see it, but I see its effects, you see the results of trying to break the law of gravity, but that doesn't mean it's not real. God is the Creator of all reality, and He sees the visible and the invisible.

Therefore, faith in God is when God lets you see what He sees about reality, and you adjust your life and act according to that reality.

This is what we understand in Hebrews 11. If you are to believe in God, you first have to believe there is a God. Your concept of reality must include the idea of God. This is what the writer of Hebrews says in verse six. If you're to have faith, you have to believe that God exists. In your understanding of reality, you have to believe there is a God. If you don't believe there is a God, then you're going to act as if there is no God. You will act like there is no God because your reality doesn't allow for God.

Faith always acts according to what you believe is true. Therefore faith sees something about reality that God allows us to see.

Look at Hebrews 11:1, this is the definition of *faith*.

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1)

What is *faith*? Faith is the ability to see reality as God sees it, even though materially you do not possess it. You don't hope for something that you already possess. In fact, Paul says that in Romans 8:24, “but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees?” You don't hope for something you can see. Why would you hope for something you already have? If you already possess it, you don't hope for it because it's already yours.

Here he says that faith is the essence and reality, the substance, of something you're looking forward to. You don't possess it now, but God puts within your heart that fact. You don't possess it, you can't see it, it's not material, it hasn't happened yet, but to you, because of faith, you're able to see it. It's proof, it's positive, it's sure in your soul because faith always sees what God allows it to see. Without you being able to see reality like God sees it, you cannot have faith in something you cannot see.

For example, if you're going through a difficulty and you came across the verse that says, “I will never leave you or forsake you,” you can experience the hope that you are not alone. Can you see God? Can you see Christ? The Bible says He is the “invisible, immortal God.” But though I cannot see Him, in my understanding of reality, I believe that He is with me, and because I believe He is with me my life is dictated by that truth. I live differently than if I didn't believe God was right here. Faith first sees what is true about reality.

“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.” (Hebrews 11:13)

This is a crucial text and often overlooked. These people had an understanding of reality that included certain promises from God. Yet, in their lifetime they never saw the fulfillment of the

promise, but it did not matter because it was real to them. They did not need to see it happen for it to be real. The promises were real to them. Faith is the ability to possess something in your heart before you possess it in your hand. It's because you have faith as God gives you understanding through His Word. "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God." As God grants you understanding and you see that it's real, you then change, you adjust, and act according to that truth and reality.

B. Faith Acts.

A faith that doesn't act is not genuine faith. Hence Peter's problem. He thought he believed but he didn't act on what he thought he believed, he acted contrary.

Every time God allows a man or woman to see something not yet material, something invisible in the spiritual realm, there is always corresponding action.

"By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household," (Hebrews 11:7)

How did faith work in Noah's life? How do we know Noah had faith that it would rain? He never saw the world flooded by rain. This was not something he was taught in elementary school or even secondary education. He didn't receive the understanding of all of this in some kind of academic way. God spoke and with that, faith and understanding was granted, and as a result he built a boat.

Noah acts. When you see reality as God sees it is real to you and you have to act in accordance. The same is said of Abraham in verse eight.

"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going." (Hebrews 11:8)

Because he didn't know where he was going didn't change reality for Abraham. It was real. God had spoken to him, promised him a land and because he could see it as God saw it, it was reality for him, and he correspondingly obeyed and moved in obedience.

You can only act in accordance with what you believe is reality. If it's not real, you can't act accordingly. This is why the mentally insane have to be cared for and often institutionalized. They're a danger to themselves and others. Why? Because they cannot see reality as we see it and their perception of reality is real to them, therefore they are a danger because they believe their perception of reality. A man can believe he is Superman and can stop a speeding locomotive. Therefore he stands in front of a racing train and is killed. He acted based on his understanding of reality. That's the way we're all made. You can only act and live according to what you believe is reality.

Faith is simply seeing what God sees and acting accordingly. If you're not acting in accordance with what God has said, you don't believe it God. This was Peter's problem.

II. Peter's Faith Problem

Go back to Luke 22.

Peter's faith problem was like most of us, he didn't realize that his faith was the wrong kind of faith.

There are different degrees of faith in God and different degrees of human faith. But I've discovered over the years there are two different kinds of faith.

A. Abstract Faith

This is what Peter had. Why abstract?

Abstract = thought of apart from concrete realities, specific objects, or actual instances: theoretical; not applied or practical:

Abstract faith is believing something to be true, but not acting like it is true. We think we believe something or an idea to be true, but we really do not believe it.

Peter's confession here is an example. Jesus had said, "Peter, Satan desires to sift you. You're going to be tested by Satan. I've prayed for you; you'll not completely lose your faith, but you are going to deny Me." Peter responds by saying, "Oh no, Lord. These I I guys, they can do that, but I'm willing to go to prison for You. I'm willing to die for You."

Do you think when Peter made that statement he was trying to deceive Jesus and fool Him into believing he was the only dedicated one of the bunch? Absolutely not. Peter believed everything he said to Jesus. He believed that it was true that he would be the last man standing beside Christ and he was willing even to die with Him. He believed what he said was true. What he thought was what he believed. But he didn't follow through with it. His faith was merely abstract. It wasn't based upon reality. Abstract faith is never acted upon. Let me give you an example.

Because I believe in the law of gravity, I don't step out of a plane without a parachute. To be frank with you, I don't step out of planes with a parachute. But because I believe in the reality of gravity, I don't step off of skyscrapers. I don't climb tall things without some means of security because I believe reality says if I defy gravity, the consequences and results are going to be disastrous.

You don't defy gravity. What goes up must eventually come back down. Because I believe that, I act accordingly. I don't step out of planes without a parachute. I don't step off high rise buildings. I adjust my life accordingly. But what if I only think that's true but I don't believe it's true? That's

what abstract faith is. Abstract faith is simply based upon knowledge and mental agreement with that knowledge and hence the problem of the modern era of Christianity.

For most people who claim to be a Christian, this is the total extent of their faith. It's not real; it's abstract. They think they believe in Jesus, but they really don't, it's not reality. For many of us, that was true before we were converted. Think about it. You believed you were a Christian before you were actually converted. You believed that you believed. You believed that was true about you. If somebody challenged your faith in Christ, why, you would argue and maybe even get somewhat angry because you believed that your faith was real. You didn't think you believed a lie or that you were false in your profession. You actually believed you were true.

But was it? Not at all. You had faith in your faith. It was merely an assent to some facts about Christianity. This is the problem. We have reduced Christianity to a quiz. If you can answer the questions on the quiz of Christianity, then you are a Christian. But, beloved, that is not Christianity. A Christianity that only requires you to have a mental agreement to a few facts and know a little about some information is not real Christianity. It's not reality. There is more to the Christian faith than this. Jesus is real. I know He's real. I interact with Him, He talks with me, I talk with Him. There is a companionship, friendship, a communion; there is much more to the Christian faith than just a pop quiz and answering correctly.

Most people who believe in Jesus Christ have this abstract faith, and when push comes to shove, when hard times come, they will fold just like Peter because their reality does not include Jesus Christ. It's just in the head; He's not their reality.

That's not just true about people who believe they're saved but aren't. It's also true about Christians, like Peter.

Every Christian will confess they believe the Bible is God's Word. We all believe that the Bible is true when it says that "It is more blessed to give than to receive." But look at our actions and can we see if we really believe if that statement is true? Yes, you can look at your actions and see if that is actually reality. If our actions show that we are not givers, then we can conclude we don't believe Jesus. What we really believe is that it is more blessed to receive than to give.

What you believe to be reality is how you will adjust your life. If I believe Jesus, there will be no difficulty adjusting my life to that statement. I will give generously and not begrudgingly. I will give cheerfully. Because that is a part of the fabric of my reality, I will act accordingly. But if I think I believe that is true when it comes to opportunities for giving I won't act accordingly. That's why abstract faith, like Peter's, is so different from active faith.

B. Active Faith

Real faith is always active. It's active because it believes what it sees. This determines action.

Faith is not abstract and in the mind only, but in the heart also. What do I mean by in the heart? Next week, I want to explain further. But it is something seated deeper in us than just knowing that it is true. It is embedded in the soul. I'll explain that next week and how we can see our faith grow with our understanding of reality.

Let me give you an example. If you're on a vacation road trip and you look down and see your fuel gauge near empty, what do you do? What do you feel? You feel anxious. You get a little worried. Maybe your palms get a little sweaty. If your car is like mine, you can push a button, and it will tell you the estimated miles until empty. I've never run out of gas, but I've been foolish enough to run dangerously close. Perhaps it's not a good convenience to have. One time I did that, and I pushed it. I was getting close to the end, and there were no gas stations around. I started sweating. My perception of reality told me I was about to run out of gas. Do you know what happened? The first gas station I saw, I pulled in, I didn't care how much they charged.

Because that was my reality, I acted. That's what faith does. Faith doesn't just sit there and say, "Well, I know one day it will happen." No, faith makes you adjust your life and bring necessary changes so that you will correspond with reality. What if my gas gauge is broken and I know it is broken and I know I put gas in yesterday? I then don't worry about it registering empty because my reality is that I have a full tank. I know, and I believe it.

III. The Analysis of Peter's Failure

When we analyze Peter's failure we see Peter did not see what Jesus saw.

A. Peter Did Not See What Jesus Saw.

That's amazing to me because for a year and a half, Jesus had told these men that He was going to Jerusalem, He was going to die and be raised again.

One of the first times He mentions that, in Matthew 16, Peter is the one who brings Him aside and says, "Lord, we won't have You talking like this." Jesus has to rebuke him, but even having Jesus rebuke him didn't open Peter's understanding to see the reality. He couldn't see what Jesus saw. He had faith, so you can't walk away and say, "Well, Peter's problem was that he didn't have faith." I would say the text is telling you that's not true. He had faith. He had strong faith. His faith, however, was simply misplaced.

B. Peter's Faith Was Misplaced.

Peter was true to the object of his faith; it was just misplaced.

But he said to Him, "Lord, I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death." (Luke 22:33)

Peter's faith was not in Jesus, but in himself. No one in this room can say they don't have faith. You exercise it every day, whether you're a Christian or not. You exercise faith. The question is, what is the object of your faith? What is your reality? What are you acting on?

Faith in oneself is not reliable. When we are put in circumstances we have not experienced before we often do not perform the way we think we will. Peter had never been in this place before, but standing back looking at it, he thought he would stand when no one else would. He really believed that. The reason you never perform the way you think you will is because you have never experienced those circumstances before.

This is where next week will be really crucial. This word *experience* is huge. That's next week.

Like Peter, we may think or even be convinced we know how we will perform in a certain situation. However, when the pressure comes, when there's a trial, when there's fire, we will always act on what we trust. You can't do anything else. You're not made to do anything other. When there is no time to think we react on what we trust. Always. And if that trust is in self, then we will do the easiest and the least painful. That's all Peter did.

He thought what he said was true but when the pressure came and all he could do was react, he reacted based upon his reality. What was that? He loved his life more than he loved Jesus.

C. Peter Did Not Have the Power to Resist Because He Did Not Trust Jesus.

What was his power? In that moment, when one of the servant girls said, "You're one of those Galileans, aren't you?" Peter's power at that moment was to lie and deny. That's all his power could do and he trusted his power.

If Peter would have trusted Jesus' power, he would have obeyed. Jesus' power would have kept Peter from failing.

Let me give you an example. An iron is what you use to press clothes. If the iron is plugged into the electrical receptacle it has power, but nothing will happen until you turn on the switch. It's plugged in, it has power, but it's not appropriating the power because the switch is not turned on. That's true of any electric apparatus. You can plug it in and leave it plugged in and it's going to have power but it's not going to work until you turn on the switch. That's what faith is. Faith is the switch that appropriates the power you already have as a believer. The problem is, in your perception of reality, you don't have that power. You don't believe Jesus is so omnipotent for you, you believe it for Michael or for others, for somebody else that you think is a man or woman of God, but you don't believe it for you. According to that reality is the only way you can live.

How do you know you have faith? How does the faith switch turn to appropriate the power? It's not through feeling a jolt of power. It's not by feeling something. It's by something very simple:

obedience. Faith and obedience are two sides of the same coin. When you activate faith, you obey. Faith always sees and acts.

How do you know you're believing? You're obeying.

"Pastor, I'm often fearful. When God asks me to do something, I get afraid. Isn't that a sign of weak faith?" We'll talk about that next week. My question for you is in your fear, what do you do? Not what you believe, not what you feel, what do you do? If you obey, I say to you, and I pray God opens your understanding, friend, you just exercised faith. That is as much faith necessary as if you could move a mountain. You don't need any more faith. It's not about feeling great power and doing a miracle. It's about obeying. Believing that's true, because that's your reality, and you act accordingly.

"Remember: You do not believe a thing rightly until you act in accordance with it. When you bring your life into line with your faith, you are a believer. But when your life is not in line with your faith, you are no true believer at all." —A.W. Tozer.

"Only those who are obedient believe and only those who believe are obedient. Faith is only real in obedience." —Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Faith is not in power, nor in miracles. It is in obedience.

The Lord is asking all of you, at some place in your lives right now, to trust Him. I don't know what point in your life it is, but I know what mine is. But the Spirit of God is speaking to you right now and He's brought it up to you, asking you, "Will you trust Me?" "But Lord, I'm afraid." It is at that point that the "what ifs" start. You talk about gremlins. You talk about something that can be ruinous to your soul. It's the "what ifs."

I've had a lot of the "what ifs" over the last several months. "What if this ..?" "What if I'm wrong?" "What if this doesn't happen?" "What if I don't get this?" "What if I don't have enough money?" "What if this ...?" "What if that ...?"

I'll never forget what my dear, dear friend Mike Morrow said to me years ago. I was struggling to believe God about something He was telling me to do then. It was actually RTM. I said, "But, Brother Mike, what if there's not enough money to keep it going? What if there's just no means by which we can survive? What if?" This was six years ago. Mike said, "I don't know the answers to your questions but I can tell you that God doesn't deal in the "what ifs" and "the maybes." When God speaks it's definitive." I learned that through that dear brother. If you're having a what if moment, you can be sure who is not talking. It isn't the Lord.

God never says "What if...?" He says, "Thus sayeth the Lord..." It's definitive. It's clear. It's never a leap into the dark, it's a step into the light, because faith first sees before it acts. If all you can see is Jesus standing there saying, "Come to Me," that's all you need. Step out and obey.

That's what it means to come to Christ. That's all it means. You think, "I think it should happen this way, I'll feel this, I'll be rushed with this emotion, or I'll cry, or I'll have joy and peace come over me." Maybe it will. Maybe it won't. But I guarantee that if you obey Christ you will have enough faith to be saved. You can never obey without faith.

If you're saying this morning, "I want to be a Christian but I'm afraid I can't be," or worried that you'll fail in the end, or you won't be a good one, my dear friends, those what ifs are not the voice of God. That is not reality. God says, "Come unto Me, you who are burdened and heavy laden, and I will (no maybes) give you rest." You come in obedience, even if you're trembling and not absolutely sure, but you're willing to conform and adjust your life to Jesus, that's faith. And the just shall live by faith. Amen.