

When Your Faith Feels Weak

Maybe you're not worried that you've lost your faith, but maybe you are worried that you've *almost* lost your faith. Maybe your faith feels weak. Jesus offers some words of comfort concerning your faith:

“Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” He replied, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.” (Luke 17:1-6 NIV 1984)

In these verses, Jesus offers some of His most difficult teaching. Words about the peril of causing “little ones” to sin and forgiving someone who continuously wrongs you is hard stuff to swallow. Naturally, Jesus’ disciples, themselves taken aback by Jesus’ difficult teaching, cry out to Him, “Increase our faith!” They are looking for bigger faith, better faith, and stronger faith. Interestingly, Jesus, instead of increasing their faith, extols the

value of even a little faith: “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed,” Jesus says, “you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.” The mustard seed was the smallest seed in the ancient world. In other words, a person’s faith can’t get any smaller than a mustard seed. Thus, Jesus speaks of not just little faith, but the littlest faith imaginable. To paraphrase, Jesus says to His disciples, “Even if your faith is the littlest faith imaginable, you still have all the faith you need. As small, as insignificant, and as shaky as it may seem, your faith is still enough to follow Me.”

You too are one of Jesus’ disciples. And He says the same things to you: “Even if your faith is the littlest faith imaginable, you still have all the faith you need. As small, as insignificant, and as shaky as it may seem, your faith is still enough to follow Me.”

Don’t Follow Your Feelings!

Even after reading this, perhaps your faith still feels fruitless and futile. Perhaps you’re still not convinced that you have faith, or at least the kind of faith that God desires. If this is you, let me offer you a warning that can also be a comfort: Don’t follow your feelings! If you feel as though you’ve lost your faith, remember that feelings cannot always be trusted. Solomon puts it starkly when he says, “He who trusts in himself is a fool” (Proverbs 28:26 NIV 1984). As Christians, we are called not

to trust in our own selves and our own feelings, but in God. As Jesus says, “Trust in God; trust also in Me” (John 14:1 NIV 1984). Our faith doesn’t follow our feelings; our faith follows Jesus. A song by Nicole Nordeman sums it up well: “When it’s dark and it’s cold, and I can’t feel my soul, You are still good. When the world is gone gray, and the rains here to stay, You are still good.”³ Even when our faith feels fragmented and fractured, God’s goodness – and His good gift of faith – is still ours.

Remember that Christ promises to strengthen faith through worship, His Word, and prayer. Indeed, the Psalmist, when he experiences a crisis in his own faith life, finds comfort and strength in worshipping God. He writes, “All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, *until I went into the sanctuary of God.* My heart and flesh may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73:13-14, 16-17, 26 ESV). The Psalmist finds his faith fortified and receives new insight and understanding from God when he



enters God’s sanctuary in worship. You can find the same thing. To that end, we invite you to join us in worship, prayer, and the study of God’s Word at Concordia. You are also welcome to talk to one of our pastors or counselors if you’re going through a tough time. We’re here to help!

No matter what the state of your faith – whether your faith has been marred by a habitual sin, shaken by a terrible tragedy, or wounded by a feeling of betrayal – continue to follow Jesus and know that you have *not* lost your faith. For Christ delights in your faith, no matter how weak you may think it is, because He has given it to you. Paul writes that your faith “is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8 ESV). And what God gives is always sufficient and saving. You are God’s precious child.

Footnotes

¹ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951) 422.

² Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008) xviii.

³ Nicole Nordeman, “You Are Good,” from the album *Sing Over Me: Worship Songs and Lullabies*, 2006.

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Help! I've Lost My Faith!

Jesus replied, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.”
-- Luke 17:6 (NIV 1984)



She sat in my office, arms crossed, eyes defensively darting to and fro to avert my gaze. “What I’m looking for,” she said, “is a way to get in touch with God. I used to be able to get in touch with God all the time. I used to feel like He was my friend. I used to talk to Him in prayer. But I think I’ve lost my faith.” “You’ve lost your faith?” I responded. “What happened?” The room fell quiet.

After several seconds of silence, I finally spoke up. “You know,” I said, “it sounds to me like something happened that put you and God on the ‘outs.’” “Maybe,” she responded with a quivering bottom lip. Though she never did tell me exactly what happened, clearly, something had driven a wedge, be it real or imaginary, between her and God. Something made her feel as though she’d lost her faith.

Every Christian experiences a time when he or she wonders, “Have I lost my faith?” Sometimes, it’s a habitual sin that a person is sure has completely destroyed his relationship with God. Sometimes, it’s a grave tragedy that compels a person to ask, “If God exists, why didn’t He stop this?” Sometimes, it’s a feeling of betrayal which leads one to exclaim, “I can’t believe God would do this to me!” And amidst such pain, frustration, confusion, and bitterness, we can be left wondering, “Has God abandoned me? Have I abandoned Him? Have I lost my faith?”

What Faith Is

Before we figure out whether or not these people have lost their faith, we need to understand exactly what faith is. According to the great theologian Francis Pieper, “Faith, in so far as it justifies, functions solely as the medium of apprehending the absolution pronounced in the Gospel.”¹ That’s pretty heady stuff! So let’s try to break this definition down. Perhaps this definition, and faith itself, can be summed up in one simple word: *Trust*. To have faith is to trust in someone or something. For example, I have faith that my seatbelt will keep me from flying through my front windshield if I get into an accident. Why? Because I trust its safety credentials. Or, I have faith that the sun will rise and the sun will set. Why? Because I trust what I’ve seen with my eyes more times than I can count. Faith is trust – plain and simple. Saving faith, then, is faith which trusts in Jesus Christ.

What Faith is Not

Now that we’ve established what faith is, it’s important to mention a few things faith is not. Indeed, the reason many people believe they’ve lost their faith is because they make things other than faith the foundation of faith. Then, when these foundations get shaken, they think they have lost their faith. With this in mind, here are three things faith is not.

Faith is Not . . . The Absence of Doubt

Some people think faith and doubt are like oil and water, nails

and tires, Bears fans and Packers fans. They simply cannot coexist. Not true! In Mark 9, a man approaches Jesus, pleading for help with his demon-possessed son. This man says despairingly to Jesus: “If You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” Jesus immediately picks up on the conditionality of this man’s statement: “If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.” The man responds, “I believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:22-24 ESV)! Here is a supreme confession of faith tinged with doubt, belief mixed with unbelief. And yet, Jesus gladly receives this man’s faith, meager as it may seem, and even heals his son (cf. Mark 9:25).

This man’s plight is the plight of us all. For none of us have perfect faith, free of doubt. We all question God’s goodness, God’s providence, and perhaps even God’s existence from time to time. Yet, there is mercy even for doubters like us. As Jude, one of Jesus’ brothers, encourages us: “Have mercy on those who doubt” (Jude 22 ESV). Faith is not the absence of doubt!

Faith is Not . . . Omniscience

Some people, before they will believe in God, demand exhaustive, irrefutable “proofs” which will answer all their questions about the Divine. In essence, they demand omniscience, or complete knowledge, about the things of God. This kind of a prerequisite for faith is not only unreasonable, it is impossible for anyone to maintain consistently. Pastor Timothy Keller explains:

All doubts, however skeptical and cynical they may seem, are really an alternate set of beliefs. You cannot doubt Belief A except from a position of faith in Belief B. For example, if you doubt Christianity because “There can’t be just one true religion,” you must recognize that this statement is itself an act of faith. No one can prove it empirically, and it is not a universal truth that everyone accepts. If you went to the Middle East and said, “There can’t be just one true religion,” nearly everyone would say, “Why not?” The reason you doubt Christianity’s Belief A is because you hold unprovable Belief B. Every doubt, therefore, is based on a leap of faith.²

Pastor Keller’s point is well taken. To demand exhaustive, irrefutable “proofs” to every question you might have about God flows from a belief that you can understand such exhaustive, irrefutable proofs. This is a belief which itself cannot be exhaustively and irrefutably proven! Thus, to believe in God does not mean that you have to understand everything about God. Faith is not omniscience!

Faith is Not . . . A Malleable Force

Some people treat faith as if it’s Play-Doh. For them, faith is something malleable – something you can manipulate, shaping it to do anything you want. Do you need healing? Just believe enough and God will heal you. Do you need money? Just say this prayer and pennies will rain down from heaven. To my horror, I have heard more than one well meaning,

but also misguided, Christian tell another Christian that they simply need to “have enough faith” to receive what they want from God. But this is not a true view of faith!

In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul is suffering from “a thorn in his flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass him.” Like any Christian would, Paul, in faith, prays to the Lord to remove his thorn. God, however, responds to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:7-8 ESV). God does not remove Paul’s thorn. For even the strongest faith is no promise of a trouble free life. Sometimes thorns remain. This is not due to some deficiency in our faith; rather, it is due to the love of our God who, blessedly, can use these thorns to strengthen and grow us. Faith is not a force which we can use to manipulate away the hard parts of our lives; rather, it is a gift which receives God’s will and purpose for our lives. Faith is not a malleable force!

The Unforgivable Sin?

Sometimes, people worry they have lost their faith because they think they have committed an unforgivable sin. These people may even have a vague awareness that, somewhere in the Bible, Jesus talks about an “unforgivable sin.”

For clarity’s sake, here is what Jesus says about the so-called unforgivable sin: “Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has

forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” (Mark 3:28-29 ESV). What is this “unforgivable sin” of which Jesus speaks? The context is key to understanding this passage. Jesus is being rejected and ridiculed by the religious leaders of His day. They accuse Jesus of being “possessed by Beelzebul. By the prince of demons He casts out the demons” (Mark 3:22 ESV)! In their denouncement of Christ and His work, these religious leaders are belligerently and knowingly refusing to believe in Jesus and even accuse Him of doing Satan’s work.

This, then, is the unforgivable sin: refusing to believe in Jesus and attributing His work to Satan. In fact, Mark explicitly states that Jesus talks about the unforgivable sin only because the religious leaders were saying, “He has an unclean spirit” (Mark 3:30 ESV).

It is impossible, therefore, to commit the unforgivable sin and, at the same time, be worried about the unforgivable sin. For those who commit the unforgivable sin are too busy making fun of Jesus and His work to care whether or not they have separated themselves from God’s salvation.

So, if you are reading this, concerned that you have committed the unforgivable sin because you have made some serious mistake or have encountered some deep doubts, you need not worry. Your very worry indicates faith, for you are concerning yourself with the things of God.