

The journey of faith

Introduction

The great key words of the Christian faith can sometimes become worn like old pennies we sometimes find. Such pennies have passed through so many hands that the images have become worn. We often don't need a new definition of faith we just need a reminder of a great concept. So what is faith? Faith is not some unusual commodity that few lucky individuals happen to possess; rather faith is an informed response that anyone can make to the one who in Christ has spoken historically to the needs of our whole human race. Faith is relating to a person. Biblical faith is not a free-floating positive feeling within ourselves. It is trust in a person outside of, other than and infinitely greater than ourselves. All through the Scriptures we see people's faith in God knocking against the realities of earthly life. Some of the most esteemed biblical people apparently abandon their faith, mid-story. Other when pressed by crisis show remarkable outbursts of pure faith in a God they barely know. We shall pick some of these characters out as we go through this study. We shall be exploring how to have an energised faith, which enables us to annihilate the barriers that prevent us from seeing and comprehending the spiritual realities of how God can and does our story for his good. There are two ways to share the faith we have in God, with our life and with our mouth. We need to learn again how to walk by faith and not by sight [2 Cor 5 v7] and to endure as one who sees him who is invisible [Hebrews Ch 11 v27]. We should not allow questions to discourage our faith, the reality is that our human faith will always be faltering and imperfect. But like a parent teaching a child to walk, God welcomes and encourages the smallest steps of trust we take towards him. God's desire is that we are people who are being made into evermore faithful people. This study will help the process of us becoming people who are energised by faith.

Part A Principles of Faith

Study 1

The necessity of faith

Introduction

We usually applaud the winner of the race, the actor who achieves an Oscar, the winning candidate on election night. But who cheers the factory worker leaving work for the last time, yet who still believes that God will provide for him. Who cheers the young woman who wakes up in the hospital bed after the car accident, paralysed, and cries out to God for instead of curing her?

Wide view

1. What do you think it means to live by faith?
2. Who is someone you know that you would say lives that way?
3. When have you wished you had more faith?

Biblical view

Read Hebrews Ch11, 1-16

4. Consider the actions of the people mentioned in this passage. What does their behaviour have in common?
5. If your name was one those appearing in Hebrews 11, what do you think the write would say about you?
6. Why do these people deserve honour [v1-2]?
7. How would you describe the faith for which they are honoured?
8. Often we associate faith with feeling a certain way [e.g. confident, bold, doubt-free]. What indicates that these people's behaviour was based on something beyond emotional feelings [v 4-5, 7-9 11]?
9. Do you typically need to feel full of faith before you can obey God? Can you offer some examples?

10. In what ways did the faith of these people remain unfulfilled [v13-16]?
11. How did they see themselves in relation to this world?
12. How does your faith in God affect your attitude towards this world?
13. In this passage what connection do you see between faith and hope?
14. How would you define faith?
15. How does Hebrews Ch 11 encourage you have your faith in God energised?

Practical view

Make a note about how you would like your attitudes to change during this study on faith. Be as specific as you possibly can

Study 2

The heart of faith

Introduction

We all at times experience a troubled conscience. But how does God deal with our wrong doings in life? Does he keep a score of good and bad and announce the totals when we die? It was the playwright Somerset Maugham who wrote, 'If I were to write down every thought and every deed I have ever done, you would call me a monster of depravity'. In comparison to God's standards we have all fallen a long way short. So will God disregard our living without reference to him or our self-centredness simply because he loves us too much to hold anything against us?

Wide view

1. Imagine that you are a judge. Someone you love is brought before you on trial. Which would you be more tempted to comprise, your justice or your love? Explain why you answer as you do.
2. Suppose you are on trial for a serious offence, and you know you are guilty. Describe your thoughts and feelings. Now consider that Christ declared you 'not guilty' not because of a technically, or a clever lawyer, but because he has taken your penalty on himself. How do you feel?

Biblical view

Read Romans Ch 3 v 19-26.

3. What relationship do you see between law, faith and righteousness?
4. In your experience, what are some ways you have tried or been tempted to earn God's approval?
5. The law [v19] refers to God's law revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly the first five books of the Bible. When we try to become acceptable to God by keeping his law, what is the obstacle we keep running into [v20]?
6. If obedience to the law cannot make us righteous before God, what is the value of God's law [v20-21]?
7. How does being righteous in God's sight differ from being a 'good person' [that is socially acceptable] v 21-24?

8. Why might it be easier, or at least seem easier, to work towards righteousness by being a good person than to accept God's righteousness in Christ?
9. What is God's part in our being justified before him [v24-26]?
10. What is our part in being justified before God [v22, 25-26]?
11. Paul's word redemption comes from the idea of the slave market, which means to buy out of slavery. From what types of slavery has Christ delivered us?
12. If you are unsure, even occasionally that God has forgiven your sins, what help and direction does this Scripture offer you?

Practical view

Stay on the lookout for evidence of spiritual searching as you watch TV, listen to music, the radio, and read newspapers magazines. Compare and contrast these attempts with what God has done in Jesus Christ.

Consider how you can use people's efforts and longings as opportunities to share the gospel.

Study 3

The activism of faith

Introduction

We all at times need to stop and understand the connection between faith and action. We all need to evaluate the health of our own faith. The young man claimed to be a premier ballet dancer, and also an accomplished hang-glider and a champion ice skater, but his gold-plated credentials just didn't seem to stack up with his present activities. What he was doing did not seem to equate with what he was saying about himself. Words are cheap, it is far easier to talk than to come up with actions to equal our words.

Wide view

1. What is the biggest [and emptiest] boast you have ever heard?
2. Have you ever bragged about something when it was not quite true? Why did you exaggerate?

Biblical view

Read James Ch 2 v 14-26

3. According to James what is the connection between faith and actions?
4. In what sense is faith without deeds lifeless [v 14-17]?
5. Describe some evidence of a dead faith
6. When have you seen a gap between your own faith and your deeds?
7. What did you do [or are doing] to bring the two together?
8. How does James answer the question that faith and works can exist independent of each other [v18]?
9. What surprising example does James use to show that 'just believing' is not enough for saving faith [v19]?
10. How do the lives of Abraham and Rahab exemplify genuine faith in God [v 20-25]?

11. In verse 23 James quotes Genesis Ch 15v6. Paul also quotes this same verse in Romans 4 v 3, to show that we are saved by faith. How do we reconcile two ideas here that we are saved by faith and not deeds, and that faith without deeds is dead?
12. In you own life where do you think people see evidence of an energised authentic faith in Jesus?
13. The book of James is a challenge for believers to mature in their faith. What are some of the areas that you need to expand your actions of faith?

Practical view

In your group name evidences of Christian faith that you see in each other. You can either do this out loud or write a note to each other. Or you can write a note to someone who has inspired your faith by their faith you've seen in action.

Study 4

The focus of faith

Introduction

In the 1981 film *Chariots of Fire*, the runner Harold Abrahams loses a race because he keeps glancing sideways to see where his rival Eric Liddel is. Afterwards he berates himself for such amateur behaviour. He's an Olympic class runner, yet he broke a fundamental rule of racing, never look for the other runners.

Wide view

1. When have you failed at a task because you were distracted?
2. As you try to keep your focus on Christ, what most often distracts you?

Biblical view

Read Hebrews Ch 12 v1-11

3. Through this passage what attitude does the writer urge us to take towards sin?
4. In what ways does your Christian life resemble a race?
5. What is the 'race marked out for us' [v1]?
6. Why does keeping our eyes on Jesus help us to run with perseverance [v 1-3]?
7. Verse 2 speaks of Jesus being the author and perfecter of our faith. The idea is that faith depends on Jesus from beginning to end. How is Jesus involved in the beginning of faith?
The continuation of faith
The culmination of faith?
8. In our race of faith, how might we be distracted by the other runners?
By the track conditions?
By the cheers or boos of the crowd?
9. How is Jesus the perfect example of how we ought to run our own race of faith[v 2-3]?

10. How does God's discipline demonstrate his love [v 6-9]?
11. What is the intended result of God's discipline [v10-11]?
12. In this coming week in your 'race of faith' where do you anticipate the most danger of stumbling?
13. What strategies can others offer you to keep your focus on Christ?

Practical view

Draw a sketch of yourself with various weights of sin attached to you; you can picture the weights on your ankles, arms, or in a backpack. Now decide how you will cast off each weight this week. Make specific plans, to help remind you of your ultimate goal draw a cross or some other representation of Christ as the goal of your running figure.

Study 5

The finale of faith

Introduction

The chapter title of a book I have is People will summarise your life in one sentence, pick it now. Wander through a graveyard and you will see that most graves carry an epitaph, which sums up the life of the deceased person. Most are quite complimentary. People's last words are often significant they provide a window into a person life.

Wide view

1. If your epitaph summed up your life of faith what would it say? [Aim for some possibilities, not a complete answer]
2. If you could write your own epitaph, what would you say about your faith?

Biblical view

Read 2 Timothy Ch 4 v 1-18

3. Throughout this passage, what clues do you get that these are Paul's last words to Timothy?
4. What does Paul's 'life summary' [v 6-7 and 16-17] tell us about what he considered essential?
5. How do Paul's essentials compare with your own?
6. From looking back on his life Paul turned to looking forward, what was he confident about [v 8,18]?
7. Notice what Paul asked Timothy to bring him in prison [v11, 13]. How do his requests show his hope for a continuing ministry?
8. What emotions come through in Paul's account of his various relationships- good and bad [v9-16]?
9. How had other people sometimes failed Paul [v 10,14-16]?
10. How had the Lord helped Paul when people failed him [v17]?
11. How has the Lord helped you when people have failed you?
12. For what purpose was Paul's life preserved [v 17-18]?

13. What was Paul's ultimate hope?

14. Based on these principles of faith how would you like to revise the definition of faith you offered in study 1?

Practical view

People will summarise your life of faith in a single sentence. So why not write it now yourself. How would you write your faith epitaph? How can you work towards that goal?

Part B People of faith

Study A Abraham Building faith

Introduction

Giving the answer as 'Because God told me to' can often bring some funny looks for others. Some people might even question your mental stability. Such was the situation for Abraham and Sarah and Lot as they set out from Haran to Canaan, Yet here we see that Abraham found faith to obey God even without great knowledge or a long experience of knowing God.

Wide view

1. When have you made a major change you believed the Lord wanted you to, and how did you know what God was asking you to do?
2. How willing do you think you would be to make a major change in your life if God asked you to?
3. What factors would you consider?

Biblical view

Read Genesis Ch 12 v1-9

4. How did God break unexpectedly into Abraham's life?
5. We do not know how God spoke to Abraham, or what form God took, but clearly it was definite and understandable. Put yourself in Abraham's place. What would you think?
What questions would you ask God?
6. How did God's promises cover many of Abraham's possible questions [v 1-3]?
7. How would Abraham's obedience affect the whole world [v3]?
8. What aspects of Abraham's situation would have complicated his move [v 4-5]?
9. How have God's promises encouraged you to make a difficult change?
10. Think of a major life change you have made, or are in the process of making. If someone asked you, 'Why are you doing this?' what would you say?

11. The land where God sent Abraham was occupied by the Canaanites, who were pagan worshippers [v6] .How does Canaan resemble the setting of your life of faith?
12. When Abraham had travelled some distance into Canaan what additional promise and encouragement did God provide [v 6-7]?
13. What do you notice about Abraham's response to this further revelation of the Lord [v 7-8]?
14. As he packed up and as he travelled, even when he arrived in Canaan, Abraham may have had doubts or questions about the future fulfilment of God's promises, but still Abraham kept acting out of obedience. In what areas of your life can you obey God now despite doubts and questions you may have?

Practical view

Abraham's knowledge of God deepened as he followed in obedience. Reflect on how your own present knowledge of Jesus Christ compares today to when you first began to trust him. Consider not only the facts you know, but also how these facts have been seen in your character and changed your character to be like him. Draw a map of your spiritual journey so far. Note significant landmarks, milestone and detours

Study B Naaman

Everyday faith

Introduction

In 1996 the comet Hyakutake passed close to the earth. It simply appeared as a blurry star, thus disappointing those who expected a fiery display in the sky. Our expectations of faith often resemble our expectations of other things, so that when God call us to quit acts of obedience we can at times lose interest in what we are being asked to do, because in the language of today it doesn't seem 'sexy enough'

Wide view

1. When have you been blessed by someone's very simple or quiet action?
2. When you have physical needs, what kinds of responses show you that people care?

Biblical view

Read 2 Kings 5 v 1-15

3. Suppose you are Naaman, at which point in the story would you be most tempted to quit?
What would keep you going?
4. What is remarkable about the young servant girl's response to Naaman's leprosy [v 2-3]?
5. What approach did Naaman initially take toward getting his problem solved [v 4-6]?
6. How did the King of Israel's reaction complicate Naaman's quest for a cure [v7]?
7. Think of a time when your best efforts to find a solution to a problem were thwarted by another person. How did you feel and respond?
8. How did the prophet Elisha, involve himself in Naaman's problem [v 8-10]?
9. How did Naaman react to Elisha, and why do you think his objection was so strong [v11-12]?

10. When have you wished that *God* would do something dramatic in response to your faith?
11. How did Naaman's servants show wisdom [v 13]?
12. Naaman was healed physically. What spiritual change took place within him as a result [v 15]?
13. In what areas of your life do you think *God* waits for you to show an energised faith, and for you to take small steps of obedience, so that he can show you that he is truly *God*?

Practical view

Consider area of your life in which you need to obey as Naaman obeyed. Plan how you will take the first step to go down into the Jordan for the first time. Here are some possible ideas.

To cross an invisible barrier to talk to someone at church or in your neighbourhood when you have previously ignored

Vow to refrain from harmful patterns of behaviour

Your obedience may not bring immediate visible results instantly. But consider how the steps of friendship can lead to a difference, or how refusing to gossip can break a chain or half-truth and set a new example

Study C David

A faith that worships

Introduction

Years ago when I was a student we inherited a plot of land that had been a wilderness, we cleared it, planted some vegetables, cleaned up the fruit bushes that were there, pruned the trees, and then it was time to leave College and move. Some of our neighbours couldn't see why we had worked so hard to then hand it all over to someone else before we had time to really enjoy our work.

King David made ambitious plans to build a temple for the Lord. The Lord showed him that the temple would be built, not by him but by his son Solomon. David himself would never see the temple.

An energised faith is easy when everything goes as planned, disappointment severely tests faith.

Wide view

1. What do you usually do after a disappointment?
2. What is a severe disappointment you have experienced? How did you respond? How did it affect your relationship with God?

Biblical view

Read 2 Samuel Ch 7 v 18-29.

3. Think of three words or phrases that describe David's reaction to the news that his son would be the one to build the temple
4. Which of these words or phrases could you apply to yourself when you receive disappointing news?
5. What makes King David's prayer worshipful?
6. When we have a strong sense of where we've come from and how far along the Lord has brought us, how is our faith affected?
7. David voiced awe that God had spoken of David's house [descendants] far into the future [v 19-21, 27] How is faith deepened by a vision of what God can do beyond the here and now?
8. In what ways have God's people inspired and energised your faith?
9. How is David's character revealed in what he requested and expected from the Lord [v 25-26, 29]?

10. Throughout this prayer where do you find David's strongest expression of faith?
11. Why does faith in God lead naturally to worship of God?
12. When has a disappointment led you into worship, even if it took a while?
13. How can the union of energised faith with worship sustain you through troubled times?

Practical view

In a spirit of worship, what would you like to say to Jesus about

- a. Himself?
- b. yourself?
- c. about how far he has brought you?
- d. about your hopes for the future?

You could write a prayer based around the above and then share it with the group, which could lead into a period of corporate worship

Study D Jesus

A faith that asks

Introduction

Sometimes it's not who we are or whom we know, but the name we use which gets results. A junior office employee if requested by the Managing Director to check to see if a document is ready by the end of the week, the office junior only has to mention the name of the Managing Director, and it can have an impressive effect in terms of efficiency. It's not because of the junior office employee status, but because the junior employee is asking in the name of the Managing Director, which makes all the difference.

Wide view

1. When have you hesitated to ask for something because you felt you did not have enough status? How did you get up the nerve to ask [if you did]? What happened as a result?
2. Would you say it is easier to ask the Lord for small things or for big things? Why?

Biblical view.

Read John Ch 16 v 16-28

3. What is the primary theme of Jesus words?
4. Put yourself in the upper room as a disciple. The scent of the roasted Passover lamb, smoke from the oil lamps, the powerful presence of Jesus, as you listen to Jesus words, what is your mood?
5. Why were the disciples confused [16-18]?
6. How did Jesus respond to their apprehension [v 19-24]?
7. Childbirth seems an unusual illustration to use [v20-22] or adult males. How does childbirth illustrate what they were going to experience?
8. How have you felt the pain of the Lord's seeming absence?
9. The disciple's part experience s of Jesus gave them something to have faith in for the uncertain future. What experiences in your past enable you to confidently prayer with energised faith?

10. To ask in Jesus name is not just about Jesus asking on our behalf [v 26-27] it also means more than ending a prayer with the words 'in Jesus name mane'. What do you think he means by 'ask in my name'?
11. What are the implications in verse 23-28 for a Christians prayer life?
12. Why is joy a logical result of asking in Jesus name[v24]?
13. How can we avoid misusing the privilege of asking in Jesus name?

Practical view

What are the things that you believe that Jesus would have you ask for in

- a. The coming week?
- b. The rest of this year?