

So you want to be a Christian? Faith

Jesus says that the root of all anxiety is inadequate faith in our Father's future grace. As unbelief gets the upper hand in our hearts, one of the effects is anxiety. The root cause of anxiety is a failure to trust all that God has promised to be for us in Jesus.

At its core faith is *trusting obedience*. The reason your faith is so important is that it brings your will into alignment with the will of heaven and that is powerful in so many ways. Your own will has limited power to affect a small sphere of influence; namely yourself and those close to you. But God's will, can change the planet we live on when we align our will with His. Please note it takes no faith to align His will to ours. The goal of our faith is to find where and how God is moving and live in such a way that He can use us to carry it out.

Faith is not just for the spiritually elite. It is an essential quality in every Christian and to our Christian journey.

In Hebrews 11:6 we read, *"And it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him."*

Faith is available to all Christians. Faith is required to be in a relationship with God.

Hebrews 11 is known as the faith chapter in the New Testament. In it you find remarkable stories of incredible acts of faith. These are actual stories from the Bible that spur us on to greater things in God. Verses 32-34 are interesting because the writer apparently has run out of time or space to tell more stories so he writes these words:

"How much more do I need to say? It would take too long to recount the stories of the faith of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and all the prophets. ³³ By faith these people overthrew kingdoms, ruled with justice, and received what God had promised them. They shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the flames of fire, and escaped death by the edge of the sword. Their weakness was turned to strength. They became strong in battle and put whole armies to flight.

For our purposes today I want to pick out one of the stories and share it with you today.

His name was Gideon and we find his story in the Old Testament book of Judges. As I tell you this story I will make three points that will allow us to find a pattern for our own faith to grow stronger. It may be that you have some special need in your life right now and if so you can make the applications to your situation.

The nation of Israel was under the oppressive hand of Midian for seven long years. Both the land and the hearts and souls of the people had been destroyed. But God had a plan and was looking for someone to carry it out.

It is here that we find Gideon minding his own business one day when an angel of God showed up for a little conversation. This brings us to the first thing we need to realize about faith.

1. Faith answers to God's presence: Observing

¹¹ Then the angel of the LORD came and sat beneath the great tree at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash of the clan of Abiezer. Gideon son of Joash was threshing wheat at the bottom of a winepress to hide the grain from the Midianites. ¹² The angel of the LORD appeared to him and said, "Mighty hero, the LORD is with you!"

¹³ "Sir," Gideon replied, "if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? And where are all the miracles our ancestors told us about? Didn't they say, 'The LORD brought us up out of Egypt'? But now the LORD has abandoned us and handed us over to the Midianites."

¹⁴ Then the LORD turned to him and said, "Go with the strength you have, and rescue Israel from the Midianites. I am sending you!" ¹⁵ "But Lord," Gideon replied, "how can I rescue Israel? My clan is the weakest in the whole tribe of Manasseh, and I am the least in my entire family!"

¹⁶ The LORD said to him, "I will be with you. And you will destroy the Midianites as if you were fighting against one man." ¹⁷ Gideon replied, "If you are truly going to help me, show me a sign to prove that it is really the LORD speaking to me. ¹⁸ Don't go away until I come back and bring my offering to you."

He answered, "I will stay here until you return." ¹⁹ Gideon hurried home. He cooked a young goat, and with a basket of flour he baked some bread without yeast. Then, carrying the meat in a basket and the broth in a pot, he brought them out and presented them to the angel, who was under the great tree.

²⁰ The angel of God said to him, "Place the meat and the unleavened bread on this rock, and pour the broth over it." And Gideon did as he was told. ²¹ Then the angel of the LORD touched the meat and bread with the tip of the staff in his hand, and fire flamed up from the rock and consumed all he had brought. And the angel of the LORD disappeared.

²² When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the LORD, he cried out, "Oh, Sovereign LORD, I'm doomed! I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face!"

Gideon's first response was a little weak but in the end he answers to God's presence. He did this by being in a place where he could hear God speaking to him. He was very careful as we all should be about ascribing God's voice to our actions but in the end he was assured that it was God and that there was something for him to do.

He answered the presence of God in his life by faith. Let me assure you that there is no way you and I will ever do anything significant for God if we aren't connected to Him on a daily basis. I am finding this out in my own life.

I don't know that you think Pastors are like or what we do every day, but let me assure you I get up the same way you do. I have the same thoughts, desires and temptations. It is not unusual to have days when you don't feel very spiritual. There are days when the influence of world around me seems to pull me away from God and His ways. I really think some of you think that pastors much get out of bed and take a drink of holy water followed by three hours of prayer and bible study. That somehow we sleep and have dreams of walking on water and healing the sick or that we spend our days floating around on some kind of spiritual high that avoids all the junk that is in our world.

I have a news flash for you: None of that happens in my life. The only way I can have faith in God is to be observing His presence every day in my life. It doesn't happen automatically. It doesn't happen easily.

You and I can have as much of God as we are willing to pay the price for. It takes time and it takes focus. It takes being willing to work at it every day. Faith is not of ourselves but it is the gift of God. It is initiated through an encounter with Him. Faith springs up within us when we are in His presence.

When's the last time you observed God working in your life? Or are you pretty much just doing it all on your own.

Observing: Be observant when it comes to God in your life. (devout/practicing Catholic and observant Jews) There is no such thing as a non-practicing or devout Christian or an unobservant Christian. Faith answer to the presence and person of Jesus and His revealed will.

2. Faith acts on God's purposes: Obeying

We talk about obedience a lot and that's because few people follow God that closely anymore. Obedience seems to be on our terms and not God's but in reality that is not true; it's just something that apparently some people want to believe.

The truth is that God wants and expects us to obey Him by acting on His will for our lives.

"It is all right," the LORD replied. "Do not be afraid. You will not die." ²⁴ And Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and named it Yahweh-Shalom (which means "the LORD is peace"). The altar remains in Ophrah in the land of the clan of Abiezer to this day.

²⁵ That night the LORD said to Gideon, "Take the second bull from your father's herd, the one that is seven years old. Pull down your father's altar to Baal, and cut down the Asherah pole standing beside it. ²⁶ Then build an altar to the LORD your God here on this hilltop sanctuary, laying the stones carefully. Sacrifice the bull as a burnt offering on the altar, using as fuel the wood of the Asherah pole you cut down."

²⁷ So Gideon took ten of his servants and did as the LORD had commanded. But he did it at night because he was afraid of the other members of his father's household and the people of the town.

Gideon was obedient to God but he was also very aware how his obedience to God might upset those around him. Do you ever feel that? I am not talking about doing odd or strange things but I am talking about doing the will of God with our lives. The things that are clearly taught throughout the whole Bible.

²⁸ *Early the next morning, as the people of the town began to stir, someone discovered that the altar of Baal had been broken down and that the Asherah pole beside it had been cut down. In their place a new altar had been built, and on it were the remains of the bull that had been sacrificed.* ²⁹ *The people said to each other, "Who did this?" And after asking around and making a careful search, they learned that it was Gideon, the son of Joash.* Judges 6:27-29 NLT

He acted by faith by obeying God's purposes. He did this not only by cutting down the Asherah pole but by doing the unthinkable in reducing the size of his army by a ridiculous amount. We read about that in chapter seven.

The LORD said to Gideon, "You have too many warriors with you. If I let all of you fight the Midianites, the Israelites will boast to me that they saved themselves by their own strength." ³ Therefore, tell the people, "Whoever is timid or afraid may leave this mountain and go home." So 22,000 of them went home, leaving only 10,000 who were willing to fight.

⁴ *But the LORD told Gideon, "There are still too many! Bring them down to the spring, and I will test them to determine who will go with you and who will not." ⁵ When Gideon took his warriors down to the water, the LORD told him, "Divide the men into two groups. In one group put all those who cup water in their hands and lap it up with their tongues like dogs. In the other group put all those who kneel down and drink with their mouths in the stream." ⁶ Only 300 of the men drank from their hands. All the others got down on their knees and drank with their mouths in the stream.*

⁷ *The LORD told Gideon, "With these 300 men I will rescue you and give you victory over the Midianites. Send all the others home." ⁸ So Gideon collected the provisions and rams' horns of the other warriors and sent them home. But he kept the 300 men with him.* Judges 7:1-8 NLT

His willingness to obey is a model for us to follow. We stand when it's God's will for us to stand even when it may mean that we appear to lose in the cultures eyes. We go when it's God's will for us to go.

Have you ever admired the obedience a dog shows to its master! Archibald Rutledge wrote that one day he met a man whose dog had just been killed in a forest fire. Heartbroken, the man explained to Rutledge how it happened. Because he worked out-of-doors, he often took his dog with him. That morning, he left the animal in a clearing and gave him a command to stay and watch his lunch bucket while he went into the forest. His faithful friend understood, for that's exactly what he did. Then a fire started in the woods, and soon the blaze spread to the spot where the dog had been left. But he didn't move. He stayed right where he was, in perfect obedience to his master's word. With tearful eyes, the dog's owner said, "I always had to be careful what I told him to do, because I knew he would do it."

How do you measure up? Are you using what God has blessed you with to be a blessing? When God reveals His word to you do you obey? God uses the gifts and strengths that He has given us when we give them back to His and His Kingdom.

And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. ² Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

³ *Because of the privilege and authority God has given me, I give each of you this warning: Don't think you are better than you really are. **Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us.*** Romans 12:1-3 NLT

Obedying

3. Faith activates God's promises: Opening

When we by faith answer the call of God and act on His purposes it opens the door to so many good things in our lives. The Bible is full of promises and the simple truth is when we walk with Him faithfully it opens the door to God being able to pour out those promise in our lives.

The Midianite camp was in the valley just below Gideon. ⁹ That night the LORD said, "Get up! Go down into the Midianite camp, for I have given you victory over them!" ¹⁰ But if you are afraid to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah. ¹¹ Listen to what the Midianites are saying, and you will be greatly encouraged. Then you will be eager to attack."

So Gideon took Purah and went down to the edge of the enemy camp. ¹² The armies of Midian, Amalek, and the people of the east had settled in the valley like a swarm of locusts. Their camels were like grains of sand on the seashore—too many to count! ¹³ Gideon crept up just as a man was telling his companion about a dream. The man said, "I had this dream, and in my dream a loaf of barley bread came tumbling down into the Midianite camp. It hit a tent, turned it over, and knocked it flat!"

¹⁴ *His companion answered, "Your dream can mean only one thing—God has given Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite, victory over Midian and all its allies!"*

¹⁵ *When Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he bowed in worship before the LORD. Then he returned to the Israelite camp and shouted, "Get up! For the LORD has given you victory over the Midianite hordes!" ¹⁶ He divided the 300 men into three groups and gave each man a ram's horn and a clay jar with a torch in it.*

¹⁷ *Then he said to them, "Keep your eyes on me. When I come to the edge of the camp, do just as I do. ¹⁸ As soon as I and those with me blow the rams' horns, blow your horns, too, all around the entire camp, and shout, 'For the LORD and for Gideon!'"*

¹⁹ *It was just after midnight, after the changing of the guard, when Gideon and the 100 men with him reached the edge of the Midianite camp. Suddenly, they blew the rams' horns and broke their clay jars.* ²⁰ *Then all three groups blew their horns and broke their jars. They held the blazing torches in their left hands and the horns in their right hands, and they all shouted, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!"*

²¹ *Each man stood at his position around the camp and watched as all the Midianites rushed around in a panic, shouting as they ran to escape.* ²² *When the 300 Israelites blew their rams' horns, the LORD caused the warriors in the camp to fight against each other with their swords. Those who were not killed fled to places as far away as Beth-shittah near Zererah and to the border of Abel-meholah near Tabbath.* Judges 7:8b-22 NLT

Now in Gideon's case everything worked out seemingly perfect. But you have to read the story in the context of the book in which it was written. When you read on in the book of Judges you find out that not everything was easy for Gideon. God used him in this tremendous story and it was awesome. But much of his life was dealing with the mundane. Dealing with Israelites that wouldn't stay faithful to God. For Gideon because of his choice to place in faith in trust in God and obey His will it opened the door for God's blessing in his life.

Trusting obedience combined with persevering patience will inevitably birth God's promised intentions in and through you.

Opening

You know that sometimes people like to quote from Hebrews 11 which is known by some as the "faith chapter." Let me give you a few by faith statements found there:

Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see. ² *Through their faith, the people in days of old earned a good reputation.*

³ *By faith we understand that the entire universe was formed at God's command . . .*

⁴ *It was by faith that Abel brought a more acceptable offering to God than Cain did.*

⁵ *It was by faith that Enoch was taken up to heaven without dying*

⁷ *It was by faith that Noah built a large boat to save his family from the flood.*

⁸ *It was by faith that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land*

¹¹ *It was by faith that even Sarah was able to have a child, though she was barren and was too old.*

¹⁷ *It was by faith that Abraham offered Isaac as a sacrifice when God was testing him.*

²⁰ *It was by faith that Isaac promised blessings for the future to his sons, Jacob and Esau.*

²¹ *It was by faith that Jacob, when he was old and dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons and bowed in worship as he leaned on his staff.*

²² *It was by faith that Joseph, when he was about to die, said confidently that the people of Israel would leave Egypt.*

²³ *It was by faith that Moses' parents hid him for three months when he was born.*

²⁴ It was by faith that Moses, when he grew up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter. ²⁵ He chose to share the oppression of God's people instead of enjoying the fleeting pleasures of sin.

²⁹ It was by faith that the people of Israel went right through the Red Sea as though they were on dry ground.

³⁰ It was by faith that the people of Israel marched around Jericho for seven days, and the walls came crashing down.

³¹ It was by faith that Rahab the prostitute was not destroyed with the people in her city who refused to obey God.

³² How much more do I need to say? It would take too long to recount the stories of the faith of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and all the prophets. ³³ By faith these people overthrew kingdoms, ruled with justice, and received what God had promised them. They shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the flames of fire, and escaped death by the edge of the sword. Their weakness was turned to strength. They became strong in battle and put whole armies to flight. ³⁵ Women received their loved ones back again from death.

All of that sounds good but good things or great things don't always happen to those that follow Christ and we need to remind ourselves of this because often at the first sign of trouble and calamity we cry out to God often in an accusatory and blaming way. In reality, when we follow our Lord through this life, there may be crosses to bear that we cannot imagine and yet He is our only hope in these times.

But others were tortured, refusing to turn from God in order to be set free. They placed their hope in a better life after the resurrection. ³⁶ Some were jeered at, and their backs were cut open with whips. Others were chained in prisons. ³⁷ Some died by stoning, some were sawed in half, and others were killed with the sword. Some went about wearing skins of sheep and goats, destitute and oppressed and mistreated. ³⁸ They were too good for this world, wandering over deserts and mountains, hiding in caves and holes in the ground. (Hebrews 11. Misc verses)

I mentioned last week that I have a playlist of songs that I wish my kids knew; well here is another one that I wish you knew. This is an anthem of confidence in Christ and so appropriate for this season of the year.

1. Arise, my soul, arise, shake off your guilty fears;
The bleeding sacrifice, in my behalf appears;
Before the throne my Surety stands, Before the throne my Surety stands, My name is written on His hands.

Chorus: Arise (arise), arise (arise), arise
Arise, my soul, arise.
Arise (arise), arise (arise), arise
Arise, my soul, arise.
Shake off your guilty fears and rise

2. He ever lives above, for me to intercede; His all redeeming love, His precious blood, to plead; His blood atoned for every race, His blood atoned for every race, And sprinkles now the throne of grace.

3. Five bleeding wounds He bears; received on Calvary; They pour effectual prayers; they strongly plead for me: "Forgive him, O forgive," they cry, "Forgive him, O forgive," they cry, "Nor let that ransomed sinner die!"

4. The Father hears Him pray, His dear anointed One; He cannot turn away the presence of His Son; The Spirit answers to the blood, The Spirit answers to the blood And tells me I am born of God.

5. My God is reconciled; His pardoning voice I hear; He owns me for His child; I can no longer fear With confidence I now draw nigh, With confidence I now draw nigh, And "Father, Abba, Father," cry

Are you answering to God's presence by observing His presence in your life?

Are you acting on God's purposes by obeying?

Are you activating God's promises? Are you experiencing the openings in your life that could only come through Christ?