

“Thing Necessary For a Life of Faith”

Bruce Larsen in one of his books relates how there was a letter found in a baking powder can wired to the handle of an old pump by a long and seldom used trail in the Amargosa Desert. The letter said, “This pump is all right as of June, 1932. I put a new sucker washer into it and it ought to last five years. But the washer dries out and the pump has got to be primed. Under the white rock I buried a bottle of water, out of the sun and cork end up. There’s enough water in it to prime the pump, but not if you drink some first. Pour about one fourth and let her soak to wet the leather. Then pour in the rest medium fast and pump like crazy. You’ll git water. The well has never run dry. Have faith. When you git watered up, fill the bottle and put it back like you found it for the next feller. (signed) Desert Pete

P.S. Don’t go drinking up the water first. Prime the pump with it and you’ll git all you can hold.”

Isn’t that a wonderful description of *faith*! Imagine coming down that desert trail, thirsty, with you canteen or water jugs empty. And you stumble across this pump. Here’s *water*! Then you read Desert Pete’s note.

First of all, this story shows that ***faith needs an object***. In this case, the object of your faith is Desert Pete. If you come there, really thirsty, and read the note, then find the hidden bottle, you have to trust this “Desert Pete” enough not to go ahead and drink the water that’s so tempting. You don’t know Pete. Is whoever wrote the note telling the truth? How can you be positive this isn’t some jokester trying to make an idiot of people! So, the first ingredient of faith is to trust someone or something on the basis of *evidence*, but not *infallible proof*.

Then too, faith involves risk. You may be dying of thirst. There’s this water bottle. What if you listen to Desert Pete. You don’t drink the water. You pour it into the well. And nothing happens! So you have to risk pouring out this water, and maybe having no water to drink.

Faith also involves effort and work. Desert Pete says wet the washer, pour in the rest, and then *pump like crazy*! Sometimes we err and think faith means we just lay back and do nothing, and wait for someone else to make things happen! But most of the time we have to back up our faith with some kind of effort. Faith never means just being lazy!

I think these three elements are an essential part of the faith we read about in the Bible, and what the Christian faith involves. One of the people in the Bible who demonstrates these essentials of faith is *Abraham*. Abraham is called the “father of the faithful”. He’s listed in Hebrews 11, along with other Old Testament heroes of the faith.

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old – and Sarah herself was barren – because he considered him faithful who had

promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore’” (Hebrews 11:8-12).

I said: ***Faith needs an object.*** The object of Abraham’s faith is the Hebrew God Yahweh (or Jehovah). When we meet up with Abraham in Genesis 11 and 12 he is in a place called Ur of the Chaldeans. We know from archeological finds that Ur was the center of a *moon cult*. No doubt Abraham and his family and his ancestors worshiped the pagan gods familiar in that area. But then Abraham has an encounter with Yahweh, who is the *true and living God!*

Christians have this same God as the object of our faith! This God, Yahweh (Jehovah), is further revealed, and most fully revealed, in the Person of Jesus of Nazareth. *So Jesus becomes the object of our faith.*

There are many gods people worship today other than Jesus and the God He reveals. There are the *gods of other religions*: Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism. There are philosophies that are not rooted in the Christian understanding of the world and life, and people follow those “gods”. There are the gods of wealth and popularity and pleasure (hedonism). Others glorify and deify science and human reason. Recently our adult Sunday School class did a video series featuring author and Christian apologist Lee Strobel. As part of the series he did an interview with Hugh Hefner. Lee Strobel asked Hefner what he thought about the Bible, and Hefner replied that the Christian God and Christian belief was a little bit juvenile for him to believe. For Hefner, his human reasoning was His valued more highly than Scripture. Others worship the god of what can be called “American cultural religion”, which is often mistaken for Christianity. It’s a blending of God, country, motherhood, and apple pie. It’s patriotism, sprinkled in with some Biblical teaching.

It really does make a difference which God is the object of our faith! Believing in the god of the Islamic jihadist produces different results than believing in the God of Mother Theresa! For Christians, the object of our faith is the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus, the Holy One revealed in the Old and New Testament.

Just as one coming across Desert Pete’s note had to decide whether or not to trust him (or whoever wrote that note), we have to decide whether Jesus can be trusted! Is He telling the truth? Is He believable enough for us to trust Him completely? Christians say He is!

Faith also involves risk. Just believing that the God described in the Bible *even exists* is risky. What if we’re wrong? What if we’ve wasted our whole life believing in something that isn’t there? Nobody can really prove that God exists, or that Jesus is all He said He is.

But faith also involves the risk of stepping out, the risk of adventure! This was certainly true of Abraham. Hebrews 11:8 says, “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, *not knowing where he was going.*” This refers to that landmark event in Genesis 12 where Yahweh says to Abraham: “Go from your

country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). Abraham was to go, and he wasn't even told *where* God was sending Him!

We tend to view faith this way: Everything is in turmoil, and we *stand pat*, trusting God. That's true, at times. But often faith is just the opposite! We are settled in, comfortable, and faith pushes us to *move out and move on!*

Christian pastor and writer, John Claypool, talks about this. He says he learned from Abraham that "God's kind of security is dynamic, not static. If there is one word that sums up Abraham's experience with God it is the word *movement*. Instead of giving this man something to hang onto, a secure anchor that would hold steady amid all changes, Yahweh gave him a call to adventure and a promise to provide for him as he went." He goes on to say this is one of the facets of Biblical faith, that "change and movement (are) not enemies to be resisted, but...ways God does his work and calls human beings to fulfillment. Security with this kind of God never means sitting still or possessing something or remaining static; it means being continually on the way to some goal beyond the present that beckons us but is as yet unattained." He suggests the symbol of faith is not an *anchor*, but a *hoisted sail!* I like that!

Faith involves risk! For some it may mean leaving a job to do what we feel is God's will. It might mean starting to tithe when we're unsure we can afford to. It might mean making a phone call, sending an email, paying a visit – that may be tough and makes us feel uncomfortable, but we know we need to do this. Or it could move us to take on some role or task in service to the Lord when we're not confident that we have the ability to succeed. Where is God prompting you and me to "get moving"; to take a risk in order to obey the Lord and do what we sense He wants?

This applies as well to *churches and congregations*. Where do we need to step out and take a risk in order to grow, or in order to make a difference in the neighborhood and beyond? For many declining churches, the problem is not so much that members are excessively *evil*, but rather we are just *incredibly dull and lacking in an adventurous spirit!*

So, we have said so far that faith requires a worthy object. Faith involves taking risks. And then, finally, ***faith includes effort and hard work.*** Desert Pete said pour in the water to prime the pump, then *pump like crazy!*

For *Abraham*, his faith journey demanded work and effort. He had to move his family and whole clan to a new place, and struggle in an unfamiliar land. Hebrews 11:9 says, "By faith (Abraham) made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise." He had to flesh out what it meant to trust and obey this new God Yahweh rather than the old paganism he had known. Abraham was far from perfect, so he had to work on himself in order to be the kind of person God could use.

The life of faith includes hard work! We are not saved by hard work, or any efforts to be good.

We are saved by *God's mercy* through faith. But if we don't put any effort into our faith development, it will shrivel up. I like what Bruce Larsen says, "If we trust Him, God will do for us those things we cannot do for ourselves. But He will not do for us those things that we can do." He goes on to say: "I have never known an effective Christian who is lazy."

Very early in my pastoral ministry I called on a shut-in member of the church – a tiny, elderly woman, who was extremely blunt and outspoken. Dear Mrs. Seip! (Once, when I was giving her home communion, I started reading the communion ritual and she butt right in, "I don't agree with that!"). Mrs. Seip had had a broken leg, but had now recovered and was able to walk. This particular day that I visited her she told me of a friend of hers who had had a stroke, and not followed through with physical therapy, and as a result was now bedfast. This bedfast friend said to Mrs. Seip, "Why does God let you walk, when He won't let me walk?" Mrs. Seip said to me, "I told her, you had your chance." Then she added, "I don't give God all the credit. I worked hard for six months to be able to walk." It's kind of like the farmer who worked long and hard to plow a field that had been left unattended for some time. A friend came up, and looking over the newly plowed field with its rich soil and straight furrows, the friend said, "You and God worked together to do wonders for these acres." The farmer replied, "It wasn't much to brag about when God had it all to Himself."

Faith in the living God, faith in Jesus, along with hard work, works wonders! It's reminiscent of the familiar quote: "We should pray like everything depended on God, and work like everything depended on us."

Is there something that God wants you to do for His glory and for the benefit of others? If it's a wholesome desire, an unselfish dream, go for it! Lillian Dickson and her husband felt called by God to the island of Formosa. When they got there, they talked to a government official in social services. He looked at this young, naïve couple, and laughed. "Look", he said, "go back to America. You can't possibly succeed here. There's no way." He got up, walked over to the window and pointed outside. "Look, you can see the ocean. Helping people here in Formosa is like trying to change the ocean one bucket at a time." Lillian Dickson got out of her chair and said, "Well then, I'm going to fill my bucket." Over 50 years later, even with her husband now dead, Lillian is still filling her bucket – establishing over *one thousand churches, schools and hospitals* there!

Faith in Christ, and hard work, give us a tremendous potential to do great things for God in this world! Hebrews 11 provides a model for us as it recounts the accomplishments of some of the heroes of the faith written about in our Old Testament. Hebrews 11:32-34 chronicles some of these mighty achievements: "And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets – who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight...", and so on, and so on!

Any of you remember the Merv Griffin Show? On one program some body builders were on the

show as guests. Merv asked one of these muscle-bound guests: “What do you use all those muscles for?” One of the bodybuilders answered by giving one of those classic “look at my muscles” poses. “No, you don’t understand me,” Merv said. “What do you use all those muscles for?” The guy said, “I’ll show you”, and he flexed his muscles again, in a different pose. “No, no. You still do not understand my question,” Merv insisted. “Read my lips. What do you use them for?” Once again, the guy simply posed.

Do you believe in the Christian God? And in Jesus? Do you have faith in Him? What do you and I use all that faith for? Just to come here on Sunday *and flex*? Sing the songs. Pray the prayers. Listen to sermons. What do we use all this faith for?

There’s a world out there!

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