

What Does it Mean to Have Christian Faith?

Rich Nathan
October 15 & 16, 2016
The Journey of Faith
Genesis 15

I've been doing a series on the life of Abraham from the Old Testament that I've titled, "The Journey of Faith". Today, as I begin, I would like for you to consider with me two very basic questions. First, what is faith? And second, who has it? To answer these two questions, I'd like you to consider your day so far. When you got up this morning, did you have a cup of coffee? Did your spouse make it for you? Or did you perhaps grab a cup of coffee at Starbucks or maybe in the lobby?

My question to you is: how do you know that your spouse or Starbucks or the church didn't poison your coffee when they served it up to you? You probably didn't test it for poisonous substances. Instead, you had faith in the people serving you that they weren't trying to kill you.

Did you come to church today in a car? You know, I've heard that driving is a really dangerous activity, especially if you are driving anywhere near me. I am a terrible driver! I get distracted easily. I live totally inside of my head, completely oblivious to things around me. Did you drive to church? If so, you had faith in the engineers who designed your car, in the person who worked on your brakes at the repair shop, in the other drivers on the road.

I sure hope you didn't go near any electrical devices today. They can be really dangerous. The truth is that you and I and everyone else on this planet live our lives by faith down to the very mundane details of life. Everyone has faith, even the hardest headed skeptic.

So, what is faith? I like Mark Mittelberg's definition of faith. He says that,

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Faith is belief and actions that are based on something or someone considered to be trustworthy – even in the absence of absolute proof.

We believe and we act based on something or someone that we consider to be trustworthy. That's faith. The truth is that outside of Mathematics, we virtually never have absolute proof. What we have is sufficient evidence that enables us to believe and to act. So every one of us has faith. Otherwise, we couldn't live or function in this world.

I have one more question that we'll looking at today. What does it mean to have Christian faith? That's the title of today's talk.

Let's pray.

Slide Genesis 15:1-6

After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision:

"Do not be afraid, Abram.

I am your shield,
your very great reward."

2 But Abram said, "Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

4 Then the word of the Lord came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir." 5 He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

6 Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Let me set the context of this passage. I skipped ahead to Genesis 15 because it related much better to the baptisms that we're doing today. Now, Genesis 15 follows a tremendous battle between Abram and the men allied with him and a notorious Middle Eastern warlord who is defeated in battle, but who is not killed. So Abram and his family had this threat hanging out there. Think Isis. A rampaging army that would loot cities, enslave the people, kill many of the men, and rape the women. Abram comes back from beating them in battle. And besides this it's been at least 10 years since Abram entered the Promised Land and heard God tell him at least three times that he was going to have an heir, a son, but so far none of God's promises had come to pass. There was no child. Abram faced a present threat and future without hope. It was in that situation, knowing how Abram felt, that we read verse 1:

Slide Genesis 15:1

After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision:

"Do not be afraid, Abram.

I am your shield,
your very great reward."

How do you know when you have Christian faith?

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Christian faith is shown when we don't allow fear to control our lives

Since 9/11, America and much of the world has lived in what we might call the Age of Fear. We've gotten used to be searched on our way into sporting events. It doesn't seem strange that we're asked to take our shoes off as we go through security at the airport. There are metal detectors in every government building. Gun sales have skyrocketed. We have record levels of gun ownership in America. There's nearly one gun for every single man, woman and child in our country. Most of the guns that have been bought in recent years are not for hunting – they're not rifles or shotguns. They are handguns.

After the Great Recession, many Americans are living with economic fear. Fear that we will not be able to provide for our family. Fear that we won't have enough to put our kids through college or to ever retire. Fear are being exploited by political demagogues around the world who paint our current age in the darkest tones and keep saying to people, "Be afraid. Be very afraid. Be afraid of people who are different than you."

The great Irish statesman and political philosopher, Edmund Burke, who supported the American Revolution said:

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"No passion so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear."

There's a fascinating new book by a psychiatrist named Jack Gorman. It's titled *Denying to the Grave: Why We Ignore the Facts that will Save Us*.

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Gorman book cover

Jack Gorman points out that scientists have identified the higher order, rational, slow-working part of the brain. It's called the prefrontal cortex. They've also identified the more primitive part of the brain that works faster and processes emotions like fear. What Jack Gorman points out is that fear suppresses the rational parts of the brain. Fear gets placed in your long-term memory and it's hard to dislodge.

Jack Gorman's point in the book is that when we human beings are gripped by fear, we stop making rational decisions. The prefrontal cortex of our brains are overridden by something really primitive – fear. We often make really stupid decisions when we're in the grip of fear.

It's interesting to me how often God says to people in the Bible, "Do not be afraid." I counted up at least 50 examples of God saying to someone in the Bible, "Do not be afraid". It's found for the first time here in Genesis 15 to the Father of Faith, Abram. But God said the same thing to Joshua and to Gideon and to King Solomon and to King

Hezekiah, to the people of Israel, to Daniel the Prophet, to Peter the Apostle, to the Apostle John and the Apostle Paul. Do not be afraid. And God says to us, “Do not be afraid.”

Have you ever been really afraid? As a pastor, I’ve watched a lot of really nervous brides and grooms struggle through their wedding vows. In one particularly painful case, I watched this poor bride, who had experienced so much stage fright that it took her about five minutes to finally mouth the words “I do.”

God knows that we human beings are wracked with fears of all kinds. Some of you are afraid to fly. The very thought of getting on a plane and going up in the air to a height of about 30,000 ft. – just hearing about it unsettles your stomach.

Some of you are afraid of public speaking. The thought of standing in front of people and delivering a talk makes you sweat.

Some of you are afraid of commitment. You’ve been close to marriage on several occasions, or close to marriage, but you’ve backed away. One of the newest phobias that psychologists are listing is commitment phobia. It is a person who is afraid to commit himself or herself to anything – to a relationship, a career, or a church. A few of you tonight are afraid of growing old alone. Some of you are afraid of the future.

Someone counted up the number of commands that Jesus gives in the Gospels. They said that there are 125 imperatives in the Gospels from the mouth of Jesus. 125 different commands. Do you know the number one theme of Jesus’ commands? It’s some variation of “Do not be afraid”. Fear not. Have courage. He says this 21 times. The next closest is eight and that’s the “Love Your Neighbor” theme.

We’re the religion that teaches people to love. Even though love is the central theme of Christianity, the number one command that Jesus gives more than any other command is “Do not be afraid”. Do not fear.

You see, there are two paths, two very different approaches to life. The way of Christian faith and the way of fear. And Jesus said, “My followers are people who journey on the path of faith and do not succumb to fear.”

Do you know what one of the greatest of human fears is? The fear of completely surrendering our whole lives to Christ. Let me speak personally to some of you. You believe Christianity is true, you believe in Christ but you haven’t fully joined up so to speak. You haven’t taken the plunge because you haven’t wanted to give up control of your life to Christ. You know it is something you’ve needed to do, but you’ve hesitated. You’ve held back. You are afraid of giving up control to Christ.

The truth is, friends, that we are not big enough or wise enough to fully manage our lives or our loved ones or those around us. We are not created to control our little corners of the world. You have been made to submit to God's control. Life goes so much better when you simply turn to God and say, "Father, I am tired of trying to control all of the details of my life, the details of my family." In fact, the reason why for some of you, the reason why your life is so out of control, is because you have insisted on controlling your life instead of turning control of your life over to God. At the end of this message, I'm going to give you an opportunity to surrender control of your life to Christ.

Now for some of you, you've taken the step of yielding control, surrendering your life to Christ, but you've done so only *in part*. You continue to walk on the road of fear rather than Christian faith because you're not willing to take your Christian faith public. Maybe your family doesn't support this step you've taken of becoming a follower of Christ. Maybe your work environment is hostile to any discussion of Christian faith. You have business associates or classmates or roommates or friends or boyfriends or girlfriends that really don't approve of Christians. So you keep your faith absolutely in the closet when it would be appropriate to go public. The reason you're not willing to go public is fear.

Jesus said these really sobering words in Matthew 10:

Slide Matthew 10:28-33

28 Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. 30 And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

32 "Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. ³³ But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.

Christian faith is shown when we don't allow fear to control our lives.

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Christian faith is shown when we rely on God's protection

In Genesis 15:1 we read this:

Slide Genesis 15:1

After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision:

“Do not be afraid, Abram.
I am your shield,
your very great reward.”

God as our shield is mentioned many times in the Bible. This is the first time. You know, there are so many names that God gives himself to communicate to us that he is our protector. He is our:

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- Dwelling place
- Fortress
- Hiding Place
- High Tower
- Keeper
- The Lifter of my head
- My Strength
- My Refuge
- My Rock
- My Shelter
- My Shield
- My Stronghold

You know, one of the most penetrating faith questions we can ask ourselves is: where do we turn for our protection? Where do we turn to find safety and security? What is it that we really rely on as our shield? To keep us safe, to keep our families safe? The Bible regularly warns us to not put not put our ultimate trust or confidence in anything or anyone other than in God.

What might we put our trust in other than God? The Bible says do not put your trust in weapons. For example, here is what we read in Psalm 20.7:

Slide Psalm 20:7 (NIV)

7 Some trust in chariots and some in horses,
but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.

Over and over again the Bible tells us to not put our trust in weapons. What do we make our security other than the Lord? The Bible tells us to not put our trust in money.

Slide Proverbs 11:28 (NIV)

28 Those who trust in their riches will fall,
but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.

What do we make our security in other than the Lord? The Bible warns us against putting our trust in ourselves.

Slide Proverbs 28:26 (NIV)

26 Those who trust in themselves are fools,
but those who walk in wisdom are kept safe.

And the Bible also warns us against finding our security in people or in politicians.

Slide Psalm 118:8–9 (NIV)

8 It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to trust in humans.
9 It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to trust in princes.

So what does it mean to have God as our protector? It certainly cannot mean that we Christians can't get hurt.

Followers of Christ live in the same world as those who don't follow Christ. We eat the same food. We drive on the same streets. We live in the same neighborhoods. We attend the same schools. We experience almost all of the same threats from the economy, and our health, and terrorism as everyone else does. Christians have been the victims of terrorism along with everyone else. So making God as our protector cannot mean and does mean that God promises to keep every bit of harm away from us.

To have God as our protector means that nothing that comes our way can ever separate us from God. That's what the apostle Paul says in Romans 8.35-39

Slide Romans 8:35–39 (NIV)

35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 36 As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It doesn't say that you, follower of Christ, will experience no trouble, hardship, or unemployment or slander or betrayal, or terrorist attacks – that you will not be at all threatened by angels or demons, or something in the present, or something in the

future. What is promised is that nothing can separate you, follower of Christ, from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. That when you – through Christian faith - make God your security, when you turn to God rather than alcohol, or drugs, or sex, or more weapons, or your bank account, or some politician's promises when you say, "I now realize that I am motivated by a search for security, as an answer to my worries; but I'm a Christian now, I'm going to choose to escape into God," God will carry the brunt of this. God will keep me in his love. I'm going to trust in God in this anxiety-raising circumstances.

And certainly we followers of Christ can look back on times in our lives when the Lord did supernaturally protect us when he led us away from making a foolish choice, when he protected us from the consequences of a foolish choice, when he protected us from dangers at the hands of someone else. There are times, friends, when God will literally step in and deliver you from a trap. Sometimes he delivers us through danger and sometimes he delivers us from danger.

Christian faith is shown when we rely on God's protection. Let's look at verse 6:

Slide Genesis 15:6

Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

How else is Christian faith shown?

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Christian faith is shown when we believe God's Word

Slide Genesis 15:4-6

Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir." ⁵ He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

⁶ Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

This is the first time in the Bible that we read the phrase "the Word of the Lord" come to a person. And it's the first time we read the word "believed". What is Christian faith all about? It's about believing and it's about trusting in God's word. His word is spoken by his Spirit to our souls. But most often Christian faith is simply about believing and trusting in God's Word written in the book we call the Bible.

Christians are people who are marked by their faith in scripture. Now, there are some of you who might ask the question, "Why would an intelligent person in the 21st century believe that God continues to speak to us through the Bible? Why should I believe this

book called the Bible?” There are lots of reasons that I could give you. I believe that God speaks through the Bible.

But let me give you just one that is very personal to me. I was raised in a Jewish family. I’m often asked if both my mother and my father were Jewish. Yes, both my mother and father, and all four grandparents, and going back forever – our family is a Jewish family. I went to Hebrew school as a child and Hebrew high school. I was bar mitzvah. One of the things that I found incredibly compelling that assisted me to take a step as a Jew to believing that Jesus was, in fact, the Jewish Messiah was all of the Messianic prophecies about Jesus in the Hebrew Bible that we know as the Old Testament.

In the newspaper every week, there is a business column called “The Motley Fool”. They always contain a little riddle in there that says, “Who am I?” It might say something like: I was founded in 1886 as a mail order catalog company. I began opening retail locations in 1925. I was the largest retailer in the United States until 1989 when I was surpassed by Walmart. Who am I? The answer is Sears.

In the Old Testament, likewise, has the riddle “Who am I?” concerning the Messiah. The Old Testament gives us hundreds of clues. Let me share with you some of the clues from the Old Testament concerning who Messiah would be:

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- I am Jewish
- My ancestors go back to King David
- I was born in Bethlehem
- My mother was a virgin when she had me
- I was betrayed by a friend
- I had parts of my beard pulled out
- I was mocked
- I had my clothes taken from me
- I was beaten
- My hands and my feet were pierced
- I was hung on a tree
- I was thirsty
- I was surrounded by enemies
- Not a bone of mine was broken
- After I died, I rose from the dead

Who am I? With just seven pieces of information, a letter will be delivered to one person out of all the 7 billion people in the world. Just seven pieces of information and we can get a letter to just one person in the world. All we need to know is their country, the state in that country, the city in that state, the street in that city, the house number on that street, the last name of the person who lives in that house and then the first

name. Seven pieces of information. And you can identify one person out of the 7 billion that live on planet Earth.

God gives us hundreds of pieces of information – written hundreds of years before Jesus was born - so that out of all the people who have ever lived we can know for certain that Jesus is God’s Messiah, the Savior of the world. And so we could know that the Bible is no ordinary book. It has a supernatural origin. Now if you want to grow in your Christian faith – you need to read this book called the Bible on a daily basis and say to God, “Help me to believe the words that I am reading - the promises, the commands, everything that I read in this book. Help me to believe your Word!” Christian faith is shown when we believe God’s Word.

And finally,

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Christian faith is shown when we receive God’s grace

Let’s look again at Genesis 15:2-6

Slide Genesis 15:2-6

² But Abram said, “Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³ And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” ⁵ He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

⁶ Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

This incident of Abram believing God’s Word is followed up by a very strange ritual that speaks to us about the heart of Christian faith. Here is what we read:

Slide Genesis 15:7–8 (NIV)

He also said to him, “I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.” But Abram said, “Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?”

You need to understand in the Old Testament world the Promised Land was the place of salvation; it was the inheritance. The Promised Land was the sign of God’s blessing. To have the Promised Land was to be saved, to be secure, and to be provided for. So Abram is saying to God, “How can I know that your salvation is sure for me and for my descendants. Show me the way of your salvation. Show me how people get saved.” God says, “OK,” and we read these instructions.

Slide Genesis 15:8–11 (NIV)

But Abram said, “Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?” So the LORD said to him, “Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.” Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

You say, “This is really weird. What’s going on with the cutting up of all these animals?” In the ancient Middle East, the way that people would make a binding, permanent agreement with each other was they would cut an animal in half and they would set the animal up with one half on the left side, a space between, and one half on the right side. And they would walk between the pieces identifying themselves with that cut up animal and they would take an oath saying: “If I don’t fulfill my side of the bargain, may I be cut in two, may I be treated like this animal, may I be killed if I don’t fulfill it.”

So, typically, both parties would walk through the cut up animals. In ancient times it was called “cutting the covenant.” They would walk through the animals and then they would call this curse down on themselves. If I don’t keep my side of the bargain may I be cut up like these animals.

Now, let’s look at how God saves people and how that differs from this ancient approach of making a covenant.

Slide Genesis 15:12 (NIV)

As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him.

Slide Genesis 15:17–18 (NIV)

When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—

Darkness descends and Abram falls into a deep sleep. Abram doesn’t walk through the pieces. Instead, there is this fire, like a burning torch hanging in the air and this fire which represents the holiness and presence of God goes through the pieces alone.

What do we get out of all of this? We get that the plan of God in the Old Testament and the New Testament to save the world through Abram is the story of God’s unconditional unilateral grace.

See, if God said, “Abraham, you walk through first and then I will go through after you,” that would be a conditional promise. And that is the way some covenants work in the Old Testament. “If you do this,” God says, “then I will do that.” But God’s promise regarding salvation is unconditional and unilateral. God is literally saying, “I will walk through the cut up animals by myself without you, without anything you are doing. You are asleep. You add nothing to this at all.” God walks alone through the cut up pieces. And God in his unbelievable condescension is saying, “May I be cut up like those animals. May it be done to me as has been done to these animals if I don’t fulfill my oath to save any who have the faith of Abraham.”

And do you know there was another moment in history when the sky was darkened. It was 2000 years after the incident in Genesis 15. It was the time we call Good Friday when God in the person of his Son, Jesus, hung on a cross alone – not us and him, just Jesus alone – and he said, “It is being done to me; I’m going to take all your broken promises and your whole broken life and I’m going to allow my body to be cut apart to save you.” Pure grace!

Friends, Christian faith receives what God has done to accomplish salvation through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who he has appointed Lord of all. The story of the gospel is not about you and me. The gospel has a single actor; it is a solo act. It is about God and what God has done. God walked through the cut up animals alone. Remember, Abram was asleep. This gospel is not about your good stuff, or your bad stuff. The gospel is not about your past, your present, your future, or your good intentions because the gospel is not about you, or me. It is about God and what God has done by himself on the cross. The gospel is a solo act. Christian faith does not look at ourselves. Christian faith looks at Jesus Christ.

Christian faith doesn’t allow fear to control our lives. Christian faith relies on God’s protection.

Christian faith simply believes God’s word. Christian faith receives God’s grace most clearly at the cross of Jesus Christ.

Let’s pray.

What Does it Mean to Have Christian Faith?

Rich Nathan
October 15 & 16, 2016
The Journey of Faith
Genesis 15

- I. Christian faith is shown when we don't allow fear to control our lives
- II. Christian faith is shown when we rely on God's protection
- III. Christian faith is shown when we believe God's Word
- IV. Christian faith is shown when we receive God's grace