

Growing In Faith

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Scripture Reading: Mark 9:21-29

²¹ Jesus asked the father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. ²² It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.” ²³ Jesus said to him, “If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.” ²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief!” ²⁵ When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!” ²⁶ After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, “He is dead.” ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. ²⁸ When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?” ²⁹ He said to them, “This kind can come out only through prayer.”

Take a moment and think about how you came to place your faith and life in Jesus Christ. Was it when you were a child, a youth or young adult, or maybe in your adult years and possible even in your later years of life?

Maybe it wasn't a specific time in your life when you an ah-ha moment, but rather was part of your growth from as far back as you remember, always having placed your faith in Christ as your Lord and Savior when you were a child and faithfully following ever since.

Some of you may have had a life-changing experience where you were once not really interested in or committed to God but then couldn't help but go to God and place your faith in and live for him.

A few of you may have been like the apostle Paul who fought against God but was brought to your knees in order to find how much you needed to change your ways, and in doing so became the man or woman of faith you are today.

No matter how you came to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, and no matter how long you've been a Christian, we are all called to grow in faith.

When we consider growing as Christians, there are so ways in which we grow when it comes to our faith in and walk with Christ. The ways in which we grow in faith include, but not limited to:

Daily choosing to follow Jesus; reading the Bible; worshiping; serving; going through trials and challenges alone as well as with others; reading other books about faith; praying; giving, sacrificing; persevering, striving to commit your life and do all for God; learning from other people of faith; and more.

Some think that they are done when they believe in Christ as their savior, believing that's all that is needed to be done, then waiting for Jesus to come back in his second coming or until life is finished.

Some wonder why grow or work at growing or do much more as Christians since they're saved and that's all they need.

Unfortunately, we sometimes see this happen in other areas of life such as when someone works so hard to earn something, get something, or even win someone over, if you want to say, and then once they do, they stop doing the work that needs to be done to maintain, take care of, and nurture it.

And faith is more than a thing, it's a major and vital part of our relationship with God and for how we live a life of love in relationship with God and everyone around us, family, friends, strangers, and even enemies.

We are told and taught of many aspects of how integral faith is for everyday life, not only a one-time use for salvation. Here are a few of the many verses I want to share with you about faith:

For we live by faith, not by sight. – 2 Corinthians 5:7

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. – Ephesians 2:8-9

Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ. – Romans 10:17

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. – Hebrews 11:6

Because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. – James 1:3

In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. – James 2:17

Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity. – 1 Timothy 4:12

And two more:

Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. – Hebrews 12:2

We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing. – 2 Thessalonians 1:3

Each verse I read is a least one sermon each on faith. And along with those to bless and encourage you, today we are given a good look at the faith and growth in faith of the boy's father. In this account from Mark 9, we learn that this boy did not have something like epilepsy, but rather an unclean spirit that did more than cause him (as described in verses 17-18) to be unable to speak, to go into convulsions, foam at the mouth, grinds his teeth, makes him become rigid. But also, as we read in verse 22, this unclean spirit would move this boy to cast himself into fire and water in attempts to kill him.

If you read earlier in this chapter, you'll find this father brings his boy to Jesus because the disciples couldn't cast the unclean spirit out of the boy. I did not include Jesus' response in our Scripture reading for today, but I read now Jesus' response in verse 19 to being told his disciples could not drive the demon out of the boy. *He answered them, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me."*

Now, during these extended stay-at-home-days, and if you're home with others, you may at times get on each other's nerves. We get a glimpse of Jesus being frustrated with his disciples, and understandably for years being together, all day and every day. Jesus just said how he felt and what was on his mind. And Jesus was no doubt speaking the truth. We get a look at Jesus really frustrated. Basically saying, can no one else do what I showed and taught? Do I have to do everything? Of course, Jesus not only attends to the boy, but afterwards tells his disciples, after they ask, what they didn't know or understand.

For Jesus said to them, as we read in verse 29, that this kind of unclean spirit can only come out through prayer. And Jesus already implied earlier that the disciples did not have enough faith, which needed to be in conjunction with prayer, especially in this case.

Jesus did not only address the faith of his disciples, or the lacking of faith, but also the faith of the boy's father.

What we can learn and take away as well as be challenge by is to look at the areas in our lives where we struggle with our faith.

Where are you lacking faith? Where do you need to say to Jesus something like "I want to believe, but I need help with my unbelief! I want more faith, but don't seem to have it or know how to increase it."

It's amazing what happens when we grow in faith. For it is by what we believe and how strong our faith is in God that our lives are more blessed, be able to weather and persevere the storms better than not, and we are able be people of faith who help others come to faith, grow in their faith, and even overcome their own unbelief.

Take a look at your life and see where you are struggling because you lack faith, where you need to grow in your faith in God. What is it that worries you the most? What are the things that cause you to feel like there is little or no hope? What consumes your mind and energy so that you are tired by doubt, fear, and other distractions rather than being one who lives more by faith than worry, fear, stress, or anything else that saps you mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually?

Just like you take inventory of your fridge for what is lacking and what you need, or when you start your car and look at the gauges to make sure you have enough gas, or while traveling to make sure things are running smoothly, or checking your bag whether it's your kid's travel bag or work bag, or something else that you make sure you have what you need. So it is the same with our spiritual lives, not only to take account of our faith on Sundays or occasionally, but daily.

If you took time to write out your schedule and considered how much time you take in prayer; how much time you take in talking with God; how much time you spend giving thanks; how much time you pray for others and not only for yourself; how much time you take to let God speak to you through a Bible verse, a song, the beauty of nature, through others in your life, and even through challenges and struggles; what would that say about your faith and the growth of your faith in God?

This is not to be a guilt trip. It's about taking account and then seeing what you'd like to do or need to do, again likened to checking to see if you need more gas in your car before the next drive. I know most of us are not driving much, but you know what I mean.

I have to laugh a bit when I saw someone write that they were getting the amazing gas mileage of 1 week per gallon since we've been on stay-at-home orders.

But surely you are very attentive to making sure you have enough of certain things in your house, from the basics to the things that help you when you need it the most, and of course possibly some treats, like little chocolate Hershey's kisses or something else you enjoy.

Growing in faith is not something we naturally do, that is to intentionally grow in our faith. We no doubt are in a time where we are being challenged in so many ways. And we can decide on how we spend our time with God and in how we grow in our faith in him.

Returning to the boy and father, they had lived with this for many years. The boy's father asked Jesus to have pity on them. And Jesus took offense for being doubted by the boy's father when he said to Jesus, "If you are able to do anything..." Jesus pointed to how anything can be done for those who believe.

Now I have to fight the temptation to doubt as well. I say this because there are times I do believe I'm responding with reason and Biblical understanding when I say that just because you

believe when you pray does not mean you'll get it, as the Bible tells us in various ways that if it's not within God's will or you ask for only selfish desires that you will not get what you ask for.

Why I say I fight the temptation is because I do not always know for sure if it's God's will or not when asking for something or when someone asks for something.

Yet, in this case, it was not that the person just simply had to have more faith for his son healed, but that he had to place his faith fully in Jesus who could heal his son.

It's like the analogy Jesus used of the mustard seed, that even having a little bit of faith can be so powerful when it's all placed in him.

So it is with our faith how our faith grows. It's when we feel we don't have much faith at all at times and we cry out to Jesus as the boy's father did in crying out that he needed help with his unbelief. And Jesus did help him with his unbelief.

How many times has God answered your prayers? How many times has God helped you through tough times? How many times has God provided for you exactly what you needed at exactly the right time? How many times has God surprised you even when you lacked the faith?

God wants you to grow in your faith...your faith in him!

We are disciples of Christ. And we are called to do many things for Christ. So when it seems like we're beating our heads up against a wall, then consider how much you've really prayed about it, gone to God about it, and placed your faith, all of it, even when shaky, in God.

This is what helps our faith grow in all times, whether they are smooth and downhill or rough and relentlessly an uphill battle.

May you feel God's Holy Spirit speaking into your life on a regular basis so that you will take the time to grow in your faith through prayer, silence, Scripture, worship, fellowship, serving, connecting, taking breaks with God, and whatever else you can do intentionally to draw nearer to the one who is also known as the author and perfecter or finisher of our faith.

May you grow in faith today, tomorrow, and each and every day as you walk through life knowing you're never alone because your good Lord and Shepherd is always by your side and able to grow your faith in him. Amen.