

Growing in Faith

John 4:46-54

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 6-7-2009

Introduction (Matt 6:30; 8:10; 2Thes. 1:3; 2Cor. 8:7; Rom. 4:20)

Next week we are going to get back into the book of Acts and look at the subject of confidence in faith – one of Calvin’s favorite subjects. But I wanted to give some background material on the nature of faith today so that we can better benefit from that passage next week. But there are four other reasons why I want to emphasize faith. First, I am convinced that God is going to give huge challenges to faith in the next couple of years. Where America is headed could be a scary place if we do not learn to walk by faith. Secondly, Hebrews is quite clear that without faith it is impossible to please God. It’s a day-by-day imperative that the just shall live by faith. It’s not a topic to only preach on once a year. It is a topic that needs constant reminding. Third, faith is like every other area of life in this respect – it is either growing or it is diminishing. Hebrews 11 speaks of the weakening of faith; but it also speaks of growing in faith.

Did you know that the Scripture speaks of degrees of faith? It’s not just an on-off switch. There are degrees of faith. Matthew 6:30 speaks of “**little faith**” Peter had little faith, and yet with that little faith he walked on the water. It’s amazing what little faith can do, but it was little compared to what he should have had. 2 Thessalonians 1:3 says, “**your faith is growing more and more.**” And that should be true of all of us. There should be a constant growth in the level of faith that we can exercise. By the way, that phrase doesn’t make any sense if faith is simply intellectual assent. Matthew 8:10 speaks of “**great faith,**” and 2 Corinthians 8:7 says, “**you abound in... faith.**” Romans 4:20 says of Abraham, that he “**was strengthened in faith.**” Even he, the giant of faith, needed to be strengthened in faith. There are levels. We may wish that we could immediately enter into a level of faith that Muller had, or the level of spiritual warfare, or authority, or prayer that another individual or another church may have. But God usually takes us there a step at a time. And I want to look at some of those essential steps. I believe He is challenging us at Dominion to be walking into new levels of

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faith as we begin a preaching point and as we face uncertain economic times.

I. Sensing Our Need (v. 47)

The first thing we see in this nobleman is that he had a sense of his need. His need was a sickness that God had brought into his son's life. Before we even get into the text, let me admonish you to *never* think of needs as bad things. We are scared of needs, aren't we? We do everything that we can to avoid the discomfort of being in a situation of need. But I hope I can convince you this morning that needs are absolutely foundational to living a life of faith. Some of you might conclude – “Well, I don't want to be a person of faith.” But others will be thrilled that you are a perfect candidate for this life of faith since you are so weak and needy. Apart from a sense of weakness and need there is no room for faith. This is an absolutely critical first step.

Hebrews 11 gives as part of its definition of faith that it is a title deed to things that we *hope* for; in other words, things that we don't have right now. If the need were already fulfilled, there would be no call to exercise faith. And if we sense little need for God in our lives, there will be little call for faith. On the other hand, if God instills in your heart a burden to see our church achieving things in the Spirit it has not been able to achieve, or if you desire that your family would be used in a way that shows the power and presence of God that goes beyond your resources, that burden will stir up your heart to expect and believe great things from God. If you are satisfied with the way things are, then God will have to place needs in your life that you cannot escape from to stretch your faith. God wants your faith stretched, so you have two options: 1) realize your need and walk by faith or 2) have God give you an obvious need that will force you to walk by faith. That was the situation with this nobleman. He was wealthy and had very few needs from a human perspective. But God was going to bring him to have faith by bringing his son almost to the point of death.

Look at verses 46-47. **“So Jesus came again to Cana of Galilee where He had made the water wine. And there was a certain nobleman whose son was sick at Capernaum. When he heard that Jesus had come out of Judea into Galilee, he went to Him and implored Him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death.”** It was sickness that made him come to Jesus. And God often has to bring calamity into our lives to stir up faith to seek the Lord. Don't look at those in a negative light. Look at those as opportunities for your faith to grow. It seems that the better

off we are the less we see the need for Christ. Now it doesn't *have* to be that way. Abraham was a man of tremendous riches who grew in faith because he sensed his need in other ways *and* he recognized that God could take away those riches at any time – that appearances to the contrary, he was absolutely dependent upon the Lord. But Abraham was also constantly stepping beyond his comfort zones into things that God alone could do. God called him to move without knowing where he was going. Would you be able to do that? He was stepping beyond his comfort zone by not knowing the future. In contrast, before we will move we want to know everything about the future, have a detailed plan, and have everything in a neat box. And we are frustrated because God won't give the information. But He won't give because He wants you to be a man or a woman of faith more than he wants you to be a comfortable man or a woman. So for those of you who are wondering, "Why has God not given me guidance?" It's because he wants you to walk in the light that He has already given.

Hebrews tells us that without faith it's impossible to please God. And so I don't want to brush over this point quickly, because too many of you don't see your needs as being your friends. For some of you, needs don't energize excitement and faith in what God is doing. Instead, they take the wind out of your sails because the needs are hindering what *you* can do in *your* own strength. Perhaps your need is that your husband isn't what he should be, and God is not calling you to change him. God is calling you to be a woman of prayer; a woman of faith. Too many times we short-circuit the walk of faith through grumbling, anger, or other sinful responses to need that God brings to us.

That's why Christ indicated that wealth is frequently antithetical to a walk of faith. He said that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to believe. In other words, it's impossible. And then He went on to say, "*But*, with God, all things are possible." He's made many rich men strong in faith. He can do the impossible. But His point was that riches could be a hindrance to faith. And by Scriptural definitions, we are wealthy. We have a hindrance to faith that needs to be guarded against. And in case you think that you are poor, let me explain why I believe that the poorest of us is vastly richer than the average citizen in Christ's day; vastly richer than the Ethiopians I grew up with. In Christ's day only a nobleman could afford to be carried around by servants in a riding chair, but you have cars to take you places faster than kings could have dreamed of. You have a whole retinue of servants who do your work for you. Your car replaces servants. Your washing machine and dryer are equivalent to

servants who save you time by doing your clothes. So is automatic fuel. Piped gas and electricity save you several hours of chopping wood, lighting and maintaining fires. Your telephones replace the couriers to run messages for you at your whim. And we have many other conveniences that are equivalent to servants. Next time you complain about the small size of your house, compare it to the tiny one-room mud houses in Africa and in the Middle East. We are wealthy and we should thank God for these gifts. They are blessings and I wouldn't feel guilty for a moment about having them. That's not the point. The point is that we are in the category of this nobleman - one of the one's that according to Mark 10 would find it hard to have faith because there were so few physical needs. You've got something that you need to guard against.

But here's the exciting part: once you have learned to walk by faith, God doesn't have to resort to physical challenges and financial challenges to make sure that you are a person of faith. He doesn't have to bring difficulties into your life. You'll already trust the Lord in those areas. The areas of challenge will be plenty sufficient in the impossibilities of discipling the nations, starting new preaching points, or in other ways of stepping beyond our comfort zones.

But this first point means that for faith to be exercised, and certainly for faith to grow, we must be stretched outside of our comfort zone to trust the Lord to come through. We've got to sense our need. This nobleman didn't have to worry about where his next meal would come from. His faith wasn't even stretched in that area. But the Lord used sickness to show him his utter dependence upon God and his need to look to the Lord. In your life the Lord may be using a financial crisis, or a difficult child, a difficult spouse, or some other pressure. There are thousands of needs that exist around us that can be vehicles to make us realize that we cannot do it on our own; that we must trust the Lord to work through us. It may be witnessing to your neighbor. The very thought of that may terrify you. That is a subjective neediness that is fertile soil for you to exercise faith and grow in faith. Reaching your children's hearts, receiving guidance from the Lord for what God wants you to do for this week; seeking guidance and provision from the Lord for the future of this church, stepping out and asking God for pastors, lay leaders, and other resources that we presently lack; there are so many things that can stretch our faith and cause us to walk in the realm of the supernatural. Hebrews 10:38 says, "**the just shall live by faith.**" That isn't a call to faith at conversion only, but to live the rest of our lives by faith.

And on this first point, the thing that I want to challenge you in is to seek God's face for a greater vision of what you are supposed to do. There should never be a time in the Christian life when we are not stretched beyond our comfort zones into the realm of neediness; the realm of faith. I think the problem frequently is that we are satisfied with the status quo and consequently never experience a need to trust. If we saw God's calling on Dominion I am convinced that we would sense such a strong need for God's supernatural help that we would be forced to seek God's face by faith. So the first pre-requisite to growing in faith is to sense a huge need for His presence, grace, power and whatever else is needed. You have needs? Praise God! You have the first pre-requisite to faith!

II. Seeking Christ's Face (v. 47)

The second step is to seek Christ's face in prayer. You will never grow in faith if you do not grow in prayer. And my brother John talked about that last week, so I won't spend much time on it today. We can see that in verse 47, which says, "**When he heard that Jesus had come out of Judea into Galilee, he went to Him and implored Him to come down and heal his son...**" It took some time out of his schedule and some energy and a degree of inconvenience for this man to implore Jesus, just as it takes time, energy and a degree of inconvenience for us to pray.

Now here's the problem: it is very easy to receive a great burden from the Lord and have a sense of need in point I, but then to turn around and desperately be trying to fulfill that need by your own strength, and adding grueling hours to your schedule, or scheming or begging others to get involved. But while faith is active (and we'll get to that in a bit), it's core is dependence upon Christ. *If we can do it ourselves, where's the need for faith!?*

So let the need and the burden of point I drive you to prayer. If your burden is truly a burden from God, you will never be successful in carrying it out on your own anyway. God's callings upon our lives are way beyond our own strength. God's burdens drive us to seek *His* face for *Him* to work. Hebrews 11:6 says, "**But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.**" There is diligence involved, but it is diligently seeking God. My diligence has usually been in another direction. It has been diligence in working. I love to work and I work hard. But God says that what we can do in our own strength does not please Him. Kathy can wash the dishes in her own strength, but a dependence upon

Christ can enable her to wash those dishes as an act of service to Him that gives her joy. Do you see the difference? We may be doing the same thing by faith or without faith. It is only a life of faith that lays hold of God working through us that is pleasing to Him. That's what Hebrews says, "**But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is the rewarder of those who [do what? "those who"] diligently seek Him.**" Are you seeking the face of God? or is your burden something that can be fulfilled without God's supernatural intervention? The activity of so many churches is not the activity of faith, but the activity of the possible. I am praying that God would give us a burden; a vision that is so huge and so awesome that none of us think we can do it on our own (point I). I am praying that God would give us such an awesome burden that we would be driven to prayer; imploring God to come as if our lives depended upon it (point II).

III. A Confidence in His Word in the Specifics of Our Lives (vv. 47-49)

But point III is a confidence in His Word in the specifics of our lives. When Jesus said to him, "**Go your way; your son lives**", he was able to go with a confidence that Jesus would do as He said He would. Now that is God-given. We can't work up that confidence like the name-it-and-claim-it types sometimes do. It is totally God-given. Let me define faith so that you can see what we are talking about. Faith is said to be, "the mysterious surge of confidence which arises within a person as he claims God's Word for a specific situation or need and becomes certain of God's answer." The need has not yet been fulfilled, but in the heavenlies, God has given his decree, and we feel that assurance.

Let's look at this aspect of faith in the nobleman. He starts off with a lower level of faith. He starts off believing that Christ is able to do it. And this leads Him to prayer. He asks Christ to come. But Christ changes the plans and stretches the nobleman's faith in the process. Instead of coming, Christ gives him opportunity to believe His *assurance* that a miracle would happen *before* He saw the miracle. Christ knew the other Jews weren't there yet. They had such weak faith that in verse 48 it says, "**Then Jesus said to him, 'Unless you people [this is the plural - he's including other Jews] see signs and wonders, you will be no means believe.'**" It's easy to believe in miracles when a miracle has just happened, but what is hard is to believe is that God will come through before our need is met. When you look at men of faith like George Mueller, you find assurance given to them by the Lord

that enables them to stop praying and to know that God has answered in the heavenlies, and to begin praising God for His answer. Verse 50 says “**Jesus said to him, ‘Go your way; your son lives.’**” He hasn’t seen the miracle yet, but once the assurance is given, there is no more need for prayer. You can go your way. That subjective assurance is an aspect of faith.

Here are some other people’s definitions of this level of faith. Dunn says, “It gives the person a transrational certainty and assurance that God is about to act through a word or action.” Flynn says, “[it] is a Spirit-given ability to see something that God wants done and to sustain unwavering confidence that God will do it regardless of seemingly insurmountable obstacles.” I think God has burdened some of you with exactly those kinds of seemingly impossible tasks with seemingly insurmountable obstacles, and I want to challenge you to faith. This nobleman had been given assurance by Christ that it would be done. He saw nothing tangible, but he had the assurance.

Let me just give my favorite illustration from George Mueller’s life. I know all of you have heard it, but it illustrates this God-given faith or assurance that God has already answered. Sometimes Mueller had to pray and pray and pray before God gave that assurance that this was His will. This time it came almost immediately. So he didn’t always have this level of faith and assurance this quickly. But the story I am going to read is being told by the captain of a ship on which George Mueller was traveling. He said,

We had George Muller of Bristol on board. I had been on the bridge for twenty-four hours and never left it and George Muller came to me and said, “Captain, I have come to tell you I must be in Quebec on Saturday afternoon.” “It is impossible,” I said. “Then very well, if your ship cannot take me, God will find some other way. I have never broken an engagement in fifty-seven years; let us go down into the chart room and pray.”

I looked at that man of God and thought to myself, “What lunatic asylum can that man have come from, for I never heard of such a thing as this.” “Mr. Muller,” I said, “do you know how dense this fog is?” “No,” he replied, “my eye is not on the density of the fog, but on the living God who controls every circumstance of my life.” He knelt down and he prayed one of the most simple prayers. When he had finished I was going to pray, but he put his hand on my shoulder and told me not to pray. “As you do not believe He will

answer, and as I believe He has, there is no need whatever for you to pray about it.”

“I looked at him and George Muller said, “Captain, I have known my Lord for fifty-seven years and there has never been a single day when I have failed to get an audience with the King. Get up, Captain and open the door and you will find the fog has gone.” I got up and the fog indeed was gone and on that Saturday afternoon George Muller kept his promised engagement.

Now remember that we said there are levels of faith that we are taken into by the Lord, and some like Muller are given a special anointing or gifting of faith. But all faith operates in this way. Once the assurance was given to this nobleman, it would have been foolish to keep praying and praying and begging the Lord. “Lord, O Lord, please heal my son.” “I’ve already told you, your son will be healed.” “Lord, Lord, please heal my son.” No. You recognize that’s not appropriate. In fact, in a sense it would be disobedient. I’ve had times in the ministry of this church where our family had started a fast, and we had planned to have it more extended, but in the middle of the fast, God gave me such an assurance that He had answered, that I felt He wanted me to end the fast and feast with the children - which we did. And God had indeed answered miraculously. This is quite different from presumption where people try to believe something they *want*, not something God has clearly *led* on. The Word guides all, but John Calvin points out that faith also has a deep-seated, God-given assurance that goes beyond mere intellectual deduction. Calvin said that assurance is of the essence of faith.

So let me give those definitions again: Faith is “the mysterious surge of confidence which arises within a person as he claims God’s Word for a specific situation or need and becomes certain of God’s answer.” Here’s the second one: “It gives the person a transrational certainty and assurance that God is about to act through a word or action.” And here’s the third one: “[it] is a Spirit-given ability to see something that God wants done and to sustain unwavering confidence that God will do it regardless of seemingly insurmountable obstacles.” So don’t mistake presumption for this God-given assurance that Calvin speaks about.

IV. Acting On God’s Assurances (vv. 50-51a)

But the next step is critical as well. We are to act upon God’s assurance. Verse 50: “**Jesus said to him, ‘Go your way; your son lives.’ So the man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him, and he went his**

way.” He went his way. There was action he needed to take. Joshua had faith to cross the Jordan, but *when* did the Jordan part? It didn’t part because he had the *principle* of faith. It parted because he took the *action* of faith. It was when they put their feet into the water that the waters parted. Some of you have short-circuited faith by failing to take the action of faith. You were so close – but no cigar. Your faith was still born. James says that faith without action is a dead faith. It’s useless. So this really is an essential step of faith.

Some years ago I gave an illustration and applied it to salvation faith, but I think the same story applies to ongoing faith as well. It is the story of the tight rope artist Blondin.

Years ago he put on a huge exhibition of his art at Niagara Falls. He had stretched a line across the river and did his act right over the falls. He did a backward somersault at the middle of the Falls, went across on stilts, balanced a chair on two legs and sat on it, took a small stove to the half-way point, sat down, cooked himself an omelet and ate it. As a climax to a great performance, he placed the balancing rod in his mouth and pushed a specially made wheelbarrow to the audience. He asked them if they thought that he could take a person across in the wheelbarrow. Everyone gave their assent. One boy was cheering especially loudly. Pausing for a few moments he said, “Sonny, do you think I could push the wheelbarrow back again?”

“Yes Sir!”

“And, my boy, if you sat in it, do you think I could take you to the other side?”

“Yes Sir!”

“Good! Jump in and I will take you.”

His eyes got big and he said “No Sir!” There was no way he was going to climb in. He possessed faith in Blondin, but was not willing to act on the faith. He believed Blondin could take someone else across, but did not have a faith that made any difference to his own life; it was not the kind of faith that would enable him to get into the wheelbarrow and entrust his life into Blondin’s hands.

Whenever God leads Christians, they must act upon that guidance or there will be no more guidance without repentance. Faith must always have action. Turn with me to Hebrews 11, *the* faith chapter, and I want you to notice all of the action verbs in the chapter. It’s true that it starts off with faith in intellectual terms.

Verse 3: by faith we understand. But you know, even this is not walking by sight because it is believing and understanding something that happened six thousand years ago; something we did not see. It is believing something that pagans scoff at. **“By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.”** It takes faith to believe that, and when you teach your kids six-day creationism and disagree with evolutionism, you are taking the action of faith. But notice how clearly the action of faith is described in the following verses.

Verse 4: by faith Abel offered

In verse 6 faith is illustrated by coming and diligence

Verse 8: by faith Abraham obeyed

Verse 9: by faith he sojourned

Verse 11: by faith Sarah herself also received strength

Verse 17: by faith Abraham offered up Isaac

Verse 20: by faith Isaac blessed Jacob

Verse 21: by faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshipped.

Verse 24: by faith Moses refused to be called something

Verse 25 choosing

Verse 27: by faith he forsook Egypt; later “he endured”

Verse 28: kept

Verse 29: passed through

Verses 33-34: **“who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of the fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of aliens...”**

Can you see how faith is never passive? It is always active. There is a modern movement that makes faith mere intellectual assent, but that’s not Biblical. The moment God gives the assurance; faith lets us take action for His kingdom.

V. Giving God Glory (vv. 52-53)

And so this brings us to point 5. Faith grows as it gives God glory. Unfortunately, what many people substitute for faith only gives them glory. One person said, “To believe only possibilities is not Faith, but mere Philosophy.” I believe that the vision of this church gives God the glory, because when it is achieved, man sure won’t get the glory.

The nobleman did not want to attribute this to fluke chance, to natural healing or anything else. He checked the times so that it would be clear that it was at the very moment that Christ uttered his words of assurance. Look at verses 52-53: **“And as he was now going down, his servants met him and told him, saying, ‘Your son lives!’ Then he inquired of them the hour when he got better. And they said to him, ‘Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.’ So the father knew that it was at the same hour in which Jesus said to him, ‘Your son lives.’”** There are many different ways in which we can rob God of the glory. I have read large books whose sole aim is to discount miraculous things that have happened and explain them by non-supernatural means, and when that is not possible, saying that many strange things happen in this universe and we don’t need to say that it is miraculous just because it can’t be explained. They are skeptics who don’t believe miracles still happen. But this stubborn presupposition that the miraculous cannot happen guarantees an absence of faith.

Another way of robbing God of His glory is to forget to thank God when He answers, or to forget to speak to others of His glory. Another way to rob God of His glory is to act from then on as if this was a one-time fluke, and fail to continue to trust God. Or to take credit ourselves. If you want faith to grow, you must always give God the glory for any miracles of faith that God has granted.

VI. Entering Into New Levels Of Trust (v. 53c)

And I want to end with the whole concept of entering into new levels of trust in God’s working, because point VI relates to point V. Look at the last phrase of verse 53: **“And he himself believed, and his whole household.”** What is he saying here? Was this the first time this man had believed? No verse 50 says, **“So the man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him, and he went his way.”** So he already had faith to come to Jesus. Next he believes Jesus promise in verse 50, then in verse 53 he enters into an even stronger faith in Jesus. **“And he himself believed, and his whole household.”** He was now trusting God not for the past need, but for something *new* in his life. And the next day no doubt he believed God again.

He was beginning to enter into a life of faith. As we take baby steps of faith and we see God's answers, we are led to take more steps, and it is a strengthening process over life. We must be careful that we do not rest on our past accomplishments. Faith always presses forward; it makes us ready to step out into new ventures that the Lord may lead us into. It's like Caleb who said in his 80's, "Give me this mountain." If we cling to the past and are unwilling to embark on change, we will weaken the faith that we have. Rom. 4:19 says of Abraham, "**Without weakening in his faith**, [So that's indicating that a weakening of our faith is a real danger. But it says, "Without weakening in his faith"] **he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead —since he was about a hundred years old —and that Sarah's womb was also dead.**" Your faith is either going forward or backward. It is either being strengthened or it is being weakened by inaction.

Conclusion

It is my prayer that as our congregation prays for new interns, hires new pastors, starts new preaching points, raises new lay leaders, and seeks to pursue goals that require trust, that the whole congregation would grow in faith. Or as Romans 1:17 words it, would grow "**from faith to faith.**" May God receive all the glory, and may we be willing to do the impossible by faith. As that one quote in your handout says, "Faith will beget in us three things: Vision, Venture, Victory." May it do all three in you. Amen.

Growing in Faith

John 4:46-54

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 6-7-2009

Introduction (Matt 6:30; 8:10; 2Thes. 1:3; 2Cor. 8:7; Rom. 4:20)

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I. Sensing Our Need (v. 47)

- Why are the needs in our lives blessings in disguise?

II. Seeking Christ's Face (v. 47)

III. A Confidence in His Word in the Specifics of Our Lives (vv. 47-49)

- Definitions of faith: Dunn says, "It gives the person a transrational certainty and assurance that God is about to act through a word or action." Flynn says, "[it] is a Spirit-given ability to see something that God wants done and to sustain unwavering confidence that God will do it regardless of seemingly insurmountable obstacles." "the mysterious surge of confidence which arises within a person as he claims God's Word for a specific situation or need and becomes certain of God's answer."

IV. Acting On God's Assurances (vv. 50-51a)

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VI. Entering Into New Levels Of Trust (v. 53c)

- Quote: "Faith will beget in us three things: Vision, Venture, Victory."

Conclusion