

What is True Faith?

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[0 : 00] Faith. Faith. It's a word we use a lot, don't we? Especially as Christians. Already this morning in our service we've sung about faith, we've spoken about faith, we've mentioned the word a lot.

But what does it actually mean? What does faith actually mean? One modern definition, if you just had to look in some modern dictionary or on the internet, one modern definition says this.

Faith is belief in the doctrines of a religion based on a person's conviction rather than proof. And that's generally how people understand the word faith and what it means today.

It's a belief that you have and you might hold quite strongly to, but it's not really based on any evidence. And so because of that, because that's how people understand faith, while you're free to believe what you want in most countries, you're expected to keep that to yourself, generally. Keep your faith to yourself.

You know, keep it out of the real world of facts and reality. So it's fine if you want to go to church on Sunday and pray and do what you do, but don't bring that to the office on Monday.

[1 : 09] Don't bring it into the real world. Don't bring it into the school classroom. I'm sure you can relate with me when I say that's generally what people expect of you if you're a Christian.

You've got to put your faith in a box. You've got to separate your faith to the rest of your life. You've got to let it take a backseat role at best. Kind of like a hobby, you know, like stamp collecting.

That's how you're expected to treat your faith. Well, I want us to see this morning that that's certainly not what the Bible means when it talks about faith. The Bible's definition of faith and the world's definition is vastly different.

You see, when the Bible talks about faith, far from taking a backseat role in your life during your week, true faith is in fact the driving force of a Christian's life. It's the very thing that determines how you live day by day, how you make your practical day-to-day decisions.

And the reason is, when we open up the Bible, what we see is that true faith in the God of the Bible is not something that's based on a lack of evidence. No, on the contrary, true faith is based on what God has definitely revealed of himself in history and in his word.

[2 : 26] Because as we've been learning over the past few weeks, if you've been with us, God has throughout history been revealing himself to people right from the beginning. In creation, you look around, just in creation, God reveals himself.

He reveals his power and his care for his creatures. In history, God reveals his wrath for sin. And that's why the world is like it is. When we look around, we see the evidence of being in a broken relationship with God.

But that's not all he reveals. As we've been going through in Romans, we've also seen that God reveals himself ultimately in Jesus Christ. He reveals himself in the gospel.

And what he reveals in the gospel is what he's done to save people from their sin against God. And we saw last week, he did that by incredibly paying the price for that sin himself.

So he is able to both judge sin and be just as well as pay for sin and be merciful to those who come to him. And so what is faith?

[3 : 31] Faith is us listening to that. Faith is simply us listening to what God has revealed about himself and then responding to it in the way we live. Faith is living in light of God's revelation.

That's what faith is. And so you see, true faith, if you have it, will be foundational to who you are as a person. Your faith, if it is true faith, will be the thing that causes you to live as you live and think as you think and speak as you speak.

But how do you know that you have true faith? That's a good question. And that's why we're going to look at Abraham this morning that Paul talks about in Romans chapter 4 because Abraham had true faith.

He shows us what true faith is like. And in fact, Abraham is the forerunner of all of God's people who have true faith because it's that faith, it's true faith in God that marks a person out as one of God's people.

And it's through that faith we saw last week that God saves people through that faith, true faith. And so there's nothing more important for you than to be sure that you have that faith, that you have faith that is true, that faith that is real, a faith like Abraham's faith.

[4 : 43] And so this morning what I want to do is not actually go through the entire passage. You may have come to church expecting us to dig into this passage. I'm not going to do that. That's what Bible study is for. So if you do want to go into this passage in detail, please join a Bible study this week and stick there so you can continue to go through Romans this term.

But this morning all I want us to do is consider what real faith is and how it comes out in our real day-to-day lives. So that's our goal this morning. And to do that I want to limit us to verse 18 to 21 of chapter 4.

So please do keep that open in your Bibles. It will also be on the screen behind me. Because this is really a description of Abraham's faith. It helps us to understand what faith really is.

So let's have a look from verse 18. Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations.

Just as it has been said to him, so shall your offspring be. Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead since he was about 100 years old and that Sarah's womb was also dead.

[5 : 56] Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promises of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

All right. So just in this passage, there's a couple of characteristics we see to help us understand what true faith is all about. And the first characteristic of true faith we see is that true faith is stronger than circumstances.

True faith is stronger than circumstances. Do you see that in this passage in the example of Abraham? Abraham, it's a complete opposite. This type of faith that we read of here, it's a complete opposite to a worldly understanding of faith.

You know, worldly faith, faith in the worldly sense is more like wishful thinking. But it's never really strong, that strong. And it's always at the mercy of the cold, hard facts of circumstance.

So I had this kind of faith in 2010 in Bafana Bafana to win the World Cup. That's an example of worldly faith. And it was a faith that was boosted when Simpiwe Shabalala scored that first goal against Mexico.

[7 : 04] But then it was shaken when Mexico scored the equalizer. And it was completely shattered in that fateful game against Uruguay, which I'm sure you'll remember. The heartbreaking game that was.

You see, that was a kind of faith in a soccer team that rises and falls based on how the games go, based on circumstance. And that's what the world believes faith to be.

Something that changes as your circumstances change. But true faith, biblical faith, isn't like that at all, you see. Biblical faith isn't faith that's based on the ups and downs of life.

On the contrary, it stays firm even if everything around us is falling apart. And we see this in the case of Abraham. Look at verse 18. We're told, Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed.

It's quite an interesting phrase that. Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed. Now we've got to understand some background here. If you're unfamiliar with the story of Abraham or you need a refresher.

[8 : 08] You see, a long time ago, God chose, thousands of years ago, God chose to reveal himself to humans.

But he started by revealing himself to this guy called Abraham. He was just living in modern day Iraq. And why Abraham? Why did God choose to reveal himself to Abraham? We don't know. Abraham was just a normal guy, living a normal life, just the same as any one of us.

Until, okay, it was a normal life until, of course, the God of the universe decided to speak to him. That changed things a bit. God chose Abraham out of all the people of the universe and made himself known to Abraham.

And then he gave Abraham a promise. God gave this human being a promise. He said to Abraham that he would be the father of a chosen people. A people that God would select out of the world to be his own people.

And so, for that to happen, he told Abraham he must now leave what he knows behind, leave his home, leave everything behind, and travel to a place that he's never gone before. And here's the thing about Abraham, okay, when he gets that incredible revelation from God.

[9 : 16] His response is, okay. He simply believed God and he went. That's all he did. He just believed God and started on a whole new life.

You see, it was a faith that responded to what God had revealed. But then the years went on. Abraham followed God. He went about this mission that God had given him.

Years and years and years passed. But he and his wife Sarah had a problem. It turned out that they couldn't have children. Which, of course, is a problem if you're going to be the father of a nation.

If you can't even father a single child, that's quite a tall order. And because of this situation, when we read what he responded to God, he kind of said to God, listen, God, thanks for the offer, but I think you've got to reconsider your plans.

You know, Sarah and I have a little bit of a problem. But you know what God did? One night, God took him out in the middle of the night outside of his tent. And he said to Abraham, look up at the sky.

[10 : 18] You see the stars there? Look up at the stars. Can you count them? No, I don't think you can count them. That's how many offspring you're going to have. And you know what Abraham did? He looked up and he went, okay.

He just believed God. That's all he did. He simply believed what God had told him. He took God at his word. Now, his faith wasn't perfect.

At one point, he even thought that God needed some help. But throughout that, he never doubted, throughout his difficulties, he never doubted that God would do what he said, that God would keep his promise, which, of course, in the end, we see he did.

And you can read up in Genesis for yourself what the outcome of that was. But what we see, what we want to see this morning is that even though all the circumstances were against Abraham, to Abraham, God's promise, God's revealed word was more certain than the physical world around him.

God's revealed word was more certain than his circumstances. And that is a mark of true faith. Look at verse 19. We just see it illustrated there.

[11 : 26] Without weakening his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead since he was about 100 years old. Okay, you thought you were old. 100 years old, Abraham.

And that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet, he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promises of God. You see, in there, there is a picture for you and me of what true faith in God looks like.

It's a firm belief in what God has said that doesn't rise or fall based on your circumstances, based on what's going on in your life. Because there will always be, let me tell you, there will always be in your life circumstances that threaten to make you doubt whether what God says to you is true.

I mean, think, if you're a Christian this morning, think of what God has promised you, as we've seen over the last few Sundays. If you believe in Christ, God has promised you resurrection one day, a new body, eternal life, in a perfect, restored creation forever.

And yet, you look around you in the world every day, what do you see? You see a world where nothing lasts. You see a world where joy is fleeting at best. You see a world where everything is broken, where our bodies age and get sick and our loved ones die.

[12 : 45] You see, it's easy to lose sight. In those circumstances, it's very easy to lose sight of God's promises. It's easy to let our circumstances get us down and rule us, isn't it?

We do it more often than we think. What else does God promise those who are in Christ? Well, he promises forgiveness. He promises to wash you clean of your sins.

He promises to justify you in his sight. And yet, when we look around, when we look inside, when we look at ourselves, what do we see? We live each day covered with sins, don't we?

Sins that we can't get rid of. Every day, we're reminded of our failure to live the way we know we should. Our failure to be the people we know we should be. It's easy, isn't it, to lose sight of God's promises that in Christ we are already justified and perfect in his eyes.

You see, our day-to-day circumstances stand in constant opposition to the promises of God. And we often don't see that. We say we believe that. We say we believe all those things.

[13 : 49] Yes, you know, eternal life and justification. But then we live under the rule of our circumstances. And we forget those things. And it's up to you to decide which is going to rule your life.

Your circumstances or the promises of God. What will determine your happiness today? Your joy today? Your security and your peace day-to-day?

Will it be your circumstances? Or will it be the promises of God in Christ? Well, you know how you can tell which rules you more? How much you read your Bible.

Think about it. How much do you meditate and read about all that God has done for you in Christ and what it means for your life? Or do circumstances get in the way of you doing that?

Are you too busy to read the Bible? Because then you know what you're doing. You're letting your circumstances rule you rather than God's promises. Which do you want to rule you? See, if you soak yourself in God's word rather than let your circumstances direct you, it's then that you can rise above your circumstances like Abraham did.

[15 : 02] And that's the first characteristic we see here of true faith. Is that true faith isn't affected by circumstances. Secondly, we see that true faith grows in opposition.

True faith grows in opposition. Notice something here in this passage. Not only was Abraham's faith not weakened by the difficulties he faced, but it was actually strangely strengthened by those difficulties.

Do you see that? Verse 19. Without weakening his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead since he was about 100 years old, and that Sarah's womb was also dead. But what was the result of this difficulty?

We see in verse 20. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith. You see, that's incredible if you think about it.

Think about that. The fact that Abraham and Sarah couldn't have children strengthened Abraham's faith in God's promise that they would have children. The very fact that they couldn't strengthened his faith that they would.

[16 : 09] It seems crazy. It seems reversed. But that's how true faith works. And that's how true faith has always worked. True faith is strengthened by meeting and overcoming opposition.

That's how it grows. It's like a muscle. It's like how your muscles grow. If you go to the Virgin Active gym down the road, and you go to the weight training section, what will you find?

You will find a whole bunch of Biff guys with arms the size of trees lifting weights. But what's interesting about them is that they're struggling to lift those weights.

You see it on their faces. They're like really putting everything into it, and they're just lifting these off the ground. Now you wonder, if they're so strong, why are they struggling to lift weights? I mean, they look so strong.

Why are they struggling so much? Well, the reason we know that they struggle is because they deliberately choose to lift weights that are just more than they can comfortably lift. Why? Why don't they just come and stick with what's comfortable to lift?

[17 : 10] Well, the reason is because they know something about how muscles develop, don't they? They know that the only way muscles grow is when they encounter opposition from the weights and overcome that opposition.

That's how the muscles will strengthen. And that's how true faith works as well. God knows that your faith in His promises only strengthens as it encounters opposition and overcomes that opposition.

That's how it grows. And you know what that means? That means that God will deliberately send us trials to train our faith in Him because He knows that's the way it'll grow.

I mean, why do you think that Abraham and Sarah couldn't have children? Do you think that maybe after God called them, it turned out that they had problems and God was kind of like, Man, that was a bad choice.

I should have chosen someone more. No, of course not. No, God caused Abraham and Sarah not to be able to have children. Why? Well, so that Abraham would have no choice but to trust in God and not Himself.

[18 : 19] And God will do the same for you and me. The trials that He sends us will be different from person to person, but He will deliberately send us trials, send us difficulties in life to train us to trust in Him and not in ourselves.

You know, if life always went well with no issues and we were always comfortable, would we ever trust in God? No. We would trust in ourselves, wouldn't we? But God knows that our salvation is far more important than our comfort.

And seeing that our salvation is gained through faith in Him and not ourselves, He will send us trials to grow that faith because that is the way He saves us. And so as a believer, when you face difficulties in life, don't think that it's out of God's control.

Don't think that it's random. On the contrary, remember, God has sent this to you for your good, as an opportunity to trust in Him and not yourself, to train you to trust in Him.

That very faith that saves you is what God is training you to do when He sends you trials. And to know that when you come out of it, on the other end, you'll be better for it. You see, God knows that our faith and our salvation is far more important than our comfort.

[19 : 43] God is not there to make us comfortable. God is there to save us out of His love and His mercy. And that's why true faith grows in opposition.

The final characteristic of true faith we see here is that true faith glorifies God. True faith glorifies God. You see the other results there in verse 20 of Abraham's faith in spite of his circumstances?

Have a look. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God. Yet he was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God. So Abraham's faith in God's promises, despite the adverse circumstances, resulted in God being glorified.

Which is strange. Because you'd expect Abraham to be given the credit for that incredible strong faith he had. Wouldn't you? But he's not given the credit.

God is. Why? Well, the reason is that his faith in God actually had nothing to do with him. Or his strength of character. It wasn't that that caused him to have faith in God.

[20 : 58] But it had everything to do with God and the fact that God was worth trusting. That's where Abraham's faith came from. Not within himself, but from the trustworthiness of God. And there's a big difference in that.

And that is a characteristic of true faith. True faith doesn't bring glory to the one who has that faith. It brings glory to the God in whom that faith rests. To illustrate, let me use an everyday human example.

If I said to you, I really trust my wife implicitly. Would you say to me, wow, what strength of character you have to trust her? No.

You wouldn't say, why? What does that imply if you say that? Well, it implies that I'm trusting her when there's no valid reason to trust her. And so the credit will go to me. But when I say I trust my wife implicitly, credit should go actually to her because she's trustworthy, not to me for my strength of my faith in her.

You see what I'm saying? Why then, if that's the case, why then do we see when people trust God in adverse circumstances, why do we give them credit? As if the reason they have that faith is their strength of character.

[22 : 09] No, the credit should go to God for being so trustworthy despite those circumstances. We should give God the glory for showing time and time again that he can be trusted.

And not blindly. That anybody can trust him and has very good reasons to do so, irrespective of their strength of character. Because he has a proven track record at keeping his promises, which we see time and time again as we open scripture and read it.

If only we would. And another thing we learn about faith here and how it glorifies God is that true faith in God is not invisible.

True faith in God is not invisible. Abraham's faith glorified God because it was seen. It was visible. It was seen in how he lived his life. And if you truly trust God, that will be seen in your life.

It will be seen by those around you and how you live your life. Especially in difficult times. Because people will see how you react. And they'll see how you know that God is in control and working for the good despite the difficulties that you're going through.

[23 : 21] And they'll see that that is because you trust a trustworthy God and God will be glorified in your difficulties. And I've seen this. I'm sure you have.

Time and time again. When believing Christians go through incredible trials. And unsaved family and friends look on and see how they keep trusting God despite their trials.

And they ask why. And they tell them about the God they serve. And what God has done for them. And how God never lets them down. And how he's ultimately shown himself in Jesus Christ. You see, it's then that those Christians witness to the gospel far more powerfully than they could have ever done in comfort.

And it's then that God is glorified. Because true faith glorifies God. And especially in difficult circumstances.

And so those are just the things that I've wanted us to pick up this morning about true faith. And I hope you've seen this morning how true faith, biblical faith, is so very different, isn't it, to the world's understanding of faith.

[24 : 28] Far from being a leap in the dark, true faith is based on the proven trustworthiness of God as he's revealed himself. Far from being threatened by circumstances that oppose it, true faith is in fact strengthened by those circumstances.

And far from being something that's on the back seat of our lives, like people want it to be. No, true faith drives everything we do. So much so that it's obvious to those around us.

Is that the faith that marks your life? Or do you need to do some business with God today and ask him to give you that faith that you could not have by yourself?

That faith that will draw you to him day after day, even when you suffer. And that faith through which he will save you for eternity. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we have just been reminded over the past few weeks that there is nothing, nothing, nothing that we could do. To save ourselves. And yet you, in your mercy, in paying the price for our sins, you have saved us.

[25 : 39] And you call us to have faith in that. Lord, we know, we've just seen this morning, that faith isn't something we generate in ourselves. And so we pray, Lord, that you would help us to be people of faith.

Help us to follow the example of Abraham, our forefather in the faith. And help us, Lord, to live day by day in true faith, knowing who you are and responding to that in our lives.

And may that be seen. And would people be drawn to the gospel through our lives, we pray. In Jesus Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.