

How Unbelief Stops God's Activity in Your Life

The battle of the Christian life has always been not just to believe, but to keep on believing. This is how we grow strong in faith and see the actual fulfillment of God's promises in our lives.

Today we tend to soft-pedal unbelief as little more than a common weakness. But God takes no such easygoing approach (Heb. 10:35-39).

Rejecting God's promises to us is far more destructive than the sensational sins we often talk about. The Bible says it is a "sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God" (Heb. 3:12, NIV).

The great target of Satan is to break down our faith. He knows all too well that the righteous live by faith, so he aims at cutting our lifeline to God.

Faith is like the hand that reaches up to receive what God has freely promised. If the devil can pull your hand back down to your side, then he has succeeded.

Real faith is produced when our hearts draw near to God and receive His promises deep within us. There, by divine power, His Word will work supernaturally.

The chronic disease that afflicts us is not a lack of effort; it's a lack of real faith. Many times we are treating the outward behavior and not its source.

We are running the race of faith. And we desire to receive not only God's ultimate promise of salvation but also the many other promises He has made to us along the way.

Faith Follows Promises

Because of the unique place God has given to faith, His grace flows along the channels of His promises—not His commands. God's commands show His holy character and reveal our sinfulness, but they have no ability in themselves to empower us to obey.

It is not that we don't know what is right or that we don't desire to live that way. Our problem is mustering the spiritual strength to obey, and the commands of God cannot impart that (Rom. 7:18).

Saints down through the ages have not so much clung to the holy commands of God and the accompanying judgment to all offenders as they have cherished the promises and revelations concerning His great salvation through Christ (Rom. 4:5; 8:1, 3; 1 John 1:9). When trusted, these blessed promises of God release His supernatural grace in and through us.

It is these promises that draw the heart to God in faith. In fact, the great command of the New Covenant is to believe!

The Israelites who left Egypt came up short with regard to possessing the new land for this reason: They heard clearly what God promised, but their hearts did not receive it in faith (Heb. 4:2).

Today it is possible to make a living as an esteemed theologian and yet have no more living faith than a slug. Christians can listen to the Word preached every Sunday—and even have a devotional life of sorts throughout the week—without rising above the cynicism, depression and unbelief that are so prevalent in our culture.

The Word must find within our hearts an atmosphere in which its divine power can be released. That kind of dynamic faith fairly oozes from the words of the great Israelite leader Joshua near the end of his life.

He was one of only two men who left Egypt as adults and

actually made it all the way into the Promised Land. His parting instructions reveal the environment in which faith blossoms and grows.

Look Back With Thanksgiving

Joshua begins his farewell with this ringing statement: “You yourselves have seen everything the Lord your God has done to all these nations for your sake; it was the Lord your God who fought for you” (Josh. 23:3).

In other words, look back and think about all He has done. How can we have faith for the future if we don’t look back often and thank God for all He’s given us in the past?

A lack of gratitude is, in fact, one of our besetting sins. In most of our churches, there is no outpouring of vibrant thanksgiving and praise each Sunday because we are too preoccupied with our problems.

Give Him praise! Let Him know from the depths of your heart how much you appreciate His goodness!

Whether it is part of your religious tradition or not, get past your self-consciousness and formality to praise the Lord. Refuse to be embarrassed or hindered by anyone.

Look Ahead With Anticipation

Next Joshua turned his attention to the future. At the end of his years, he was still invoking the promises of God and boldly declaring that “the Lord your God Himself” would conquer the remaining Canaanite nations (Josh. 23:5).

Every one of us can point to things in our lives that are not yet the way God wants them to be. He wants to root out things that hinder and mar our Christlikeness.

God also wants to use us to bless and encourage other people

in ways we have never dreamed. And He will do these things as we live in this blessed atmosphere of faith!

Among the many definitions of faith, perhaps none is more important than Hebrews 11:1: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." Faith is the ability of the human spirit to receive impressions from God that are born of His Word and made alive by the Holy Spirit. We simply know that something is going to happen, for God's Word has been received and has activated this spiritual sense called faith.

The natural senses have to do with present and visible things. But faith has to do primarily with these future and invisible things that God has promised us in His Word.

Back in the most difficult days of pastoring the Brooklyn Tabernacle, my wife, Carol, and I were struggling to stay afloat with maybe 40 people attending on Sunday mornings. When our daughter, Chrissy, was about 2 years old, we noticed a lump under her eyelid.

I'd spent time praying about the problem. But I knew there was no faith in my heart, only apprehension.

We scraped up the money, and I took her to a doctor who recommended surgery. I knew what God had said in the Bible about healing; but I was filled with doubt and fear. I needed true, living faith, not theoretical faith.

The following Sunday, we were worshiping together at the end of the service. Suddenly my heart was flooded with a kind of divine light, and I was overcome with God's awesome greatness, which makes everything on earth seem minuscule.

I envisioned my daughter being prayed for, and I saw her being healed! It was a real picture before the eyes of my heart. God had birthed something within me.

A teen-age girl brought my daughter forward. We gathered around her, anointed her with oil and prayed together for God to heal her. Within 48 hours, the lump was entirely gone, with no medical intervention of any kind.

Now what would happen in our churches if people came to each meeting with great faith and belief that God was about to do something wonderful? Unfortunately, many Christians who strongly defend the verbal inspiration of Scripture are the most unbelieving and cynical about God ever doing a new thing in His church.

My question is: If Jesus is the same today as He was in the Bible we defend, why shouldn't we believe Him to do great things among us and through us, so we can touch people's lives in powerful ways as did the first-century apostles?

Peter was no perfect saint, but God chose him and used him mightily on the day of Pentecost. God can do the same with us if we look to Him with childlike faith in our hearts.

Look Inward—But Carefully

In addition to looking back and looking ahead, Joshua called the people to take stock of their obedience. They were to obey the law of Moses and to separate themselves from the idolatrous nations that were among them (Josh. 23:6-8).

This separation from ungodly things was for the purpose of maintaining the strength of the Hebrews for battle. Alliance with sinful things saps our strength and leaves us weak before the enemy.

Joshua knew this all too well from what had happened back at Ai (Josh. 7:1-26). After the stirring victory at Jericho, the army suffered an unexpected and humiliating defeat because the sinful disobedience of one soldier, Achan, had separated the people from God's holy companionship.

Introspection is a two-edged sword. There are special times for looking inward—for example, when receiving communion (1 Cor. 11:28-32) and at other moments of divine searching.

However, if this process consumes us, Satan can gain the upper hand, keeping us preoccupied with our failures rather than with Christ's pardon and power. The apostles called people to cleanse their hearts before God and then move on to faith and the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

Look Away to Jesus

Joshua's final instruction is stated very simply: "Be very careful to love the Lord your God" (Josh. 23:11). Our gaze must always be upon Him, for He is the one who will perform everything.

Satan wants us to focus on the problem, not the Provider. If we stop spending time with the Lord in prayer, the concerns of the physical world snatch our attention while the spiritual senses deaden and the promises fade.

The number one reason Christians today don't pray more is that we do not grasp the connection between prayer and the promises of God. We are trying in vain to pray "because we're supposed to" without a living faith in the promises of God concerning prayer.

When real faith in God arises, a certainty comes that when we call, He will answer. Soon we find ourselves seeking Him for wayward children to be saved, for a greater sense of the Holy Spirit in our church services and for spiritual gifts and power to be released.

Strength to keep believing often flows into us as we just take time to wait in God's presence and worship Him. His promises become wonderfully alive as the Spirit applies them to our hearts.

God Is Waiting for You

Let us not be hesitant about trusting God. What really matters isn't our efforts, but the wonderful truth that God is a faithful God (Heb. 10:22-23).

It is not what happens to people that makes for tragedy in their lives; it is the missed opportunities to see God help them due to their unbelief that is the real tragedy.

Joshua must have had God's faithfulness in mind when he ended his speech that day with this great crescendo: "You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the Lord your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed" (Josh. 23:14).

We, too, can finish our race in life with the same powerful declaration. Only keep believing in the God whose promises are forever true.

Read a companion devotional.

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