

Raise Your Shield of Faith

☒ God thrust the sword of the Spirit in my feeble hand 20 years ago when He sent me into a young adult Sunday school class as the teacher. Apply that last word loosely. Actually, I was an idiot.

I got a brand-new Bible for my journey and I meant to keep it that way. I neglected it. Fumbled it. Dropped it. Opened it. Yawned over it. Whined over it. Cried over it. Begged God to help me with it.

Then slowly but surely, one discovery at a time, I fell head over heels in love with it and its brilliant Author. I dug my fingernails into it and vowed never to let it go. I may have a junkyard of broken vows somewhere but, to the glory of God, that one is not in the heap.

While He strengthened my grip on the sword of the Spirit, God began wedging the shield of faith in my other hand so I'd learn to use them the way He intended: in tandem. Mind you, I thought I had plenty of faith. After all, how much faith does a church-going, church-serving soul need? I would soon learn the answer: a whole lot more than I had.

As forcefully as God has ever spoken to my heart, He said, "You believe in Me, Beth. Now I want you to believe Me." The words "believe Me" arose out of Isaiah 43:10 like a dead man leaping to his feet. "You are my witnesses," declares the Lord, "and my

servant

whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe Me” (NIV).

Believe Me. Believe Me. Believe Me. Those two words have echoed

unceasingly in my mind ever since. The Bible study I wrote titled Believing God

is my attempt to articulate my own personal journey toward obedience regarding

the command. Not here and there in crises but as a lifestyle. The piercing

voice of the prophet Isaiah proclaimed its importance: “If you do not

stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all” (Is. 7:9).

The last several years have been terribly difficult in countless ways, but

learning to practice action-verb faith in the midst of them has been the most

exhilarating adventure I’ve ever had. In words truer to my sanguine nature,

it’s been a blast. Not the trials, mind you, but the invitation to believe God

for victory—and even favor—in the middle of them.

Yes, I’ve seen miracles. Some of them were huge. But God’s daily interventions

have awed me the most and left me shaking my head in amazement that the God of

the universe would be so attentive to my trivial challenges. I have never

before so richly experienced the revelation of John 1:16: “From the

fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another.”

BELIEF VS. EXPERIENCE

I fear the reality of most Christians differs dramatically from
our theology. We bear little resemblance to a church causing
the gates of hell
to tremble.

I squirm as I suggest that the gap between our theology and
our reality is so
wide we've set ourselves up for ridicule. The sad part of it
is that some of us
are working pretty hard at something that is hardly working.

Why do we spend so much time and energy on spiritual exercises
with few effects
while the rest of the world sleeps in on Sundays? Why are we
running out of ink
in our highlighters marking Scriptures that rarely jump off
the page and onto
our pavement? Why are we doing everything we can to convince
others to do
something that hasn't worked terrifically well for us? Why
won't some of us
admit that for all practical purposes the present belief
system of most
Christians isn't working?

The church, comprised of all believers in Jesus Christ, is
generally pretending
she's cloaked with kingdom power and effectiveness while in
reality she has
exposed her powerlessness to the ridicule of the world. We
can't blame the
devil. For the most part we've dumbed-down New Testament
Christianity and
accepted our reality as theology rather than biblical theology
as our reality.

We've reversed the standard, walking by sight and not by faith. We want to be the best of what we see, but frankly what we see is far removed from God's best.

A few months ago I was taking my usual route on my morning walk when I came upon a simple scene with a telling application. Four ducks were splashing in a mud puddle in the sidewalk while a large, pristine pond was just over a small hill.

I stopped in my tracks and stared. I felt as if God was saying to me, "Beth, that's my church. My blood-bought, Spirit-promised church is splashing in a mud puddle with a sea of living waters within her reach—just on the other side."

God promised us a place of blessing. His willingness and unwavering desire to bless His people is one of the most repetitive concepts in His Word. He is the Giver of all good gifts and greatly exults when a child cooperates enough to receive some.

New Testament believers were promised blessing for obedience. Blessing is not defined by ease or worldly possessions or stock-market successes. Blessing is bowing down to receive the expressions of divine favor that in the inner recesses of the human heart and mind make life worth the bother.

Why isn't our present practice of Christianity working, and why don't we see more of God's promises fulfilled? The same reason the practices of the Israelites in the wilderness didn't work and they never reached the land they'd been promised. Hebrews 3:19 supplies the one-word explanation: "So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief."

Unbelief. Oh, they believed in God. Their oversight was that they simply did not believe the God they believed in. They talked a good talk, but their walk did nothing but tread sandal tracks in desert circles. The Israelites of the Exodus were promised land, blessing, productivity and victory; but the masses never saw their theology become a reality.

You and I can be safely tucked in the family of God and have the full assurance of a heavenly inheritance without ever occupying the land of God's fulfilled promises on Earth. We can completely miss our earthly destinies, and our carcasses can fall in the wilderness.

I don't want to be counted among the faithless who never claimed the land God promised them. I know I'm going to make it to heaven because I've trusted Christ as my Savior, but I want to make it to my Canaan on the way. I want to finish my race in the Promised Land, not in the wilderness.

You too? Then we have to cash in our fear and complacency and spend all we have

on the only ticket out: belief.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAITH

What you and I need is a fresh belief in our systems. That's what believing God is all about. Faith is the only thing that will ever close the gap between our theology and our reality.

God places a huge premium on living, breathing faith. I believe Scripture reveals to us that nothing is more important to God than our faith. Yes, love is His greatest commandment, but any of us who have accepted the mammoth challenge of biblical love in difficult circumstances can testify how much faith was required for obedience.

Biblically speaking, faith is without equal in its effects upon a human life because it is the invitation God normally answers with proof. Christ can operate any way He desires, but His usual mode of operation regarding His followers is "'according to your faith will it be done to you'" (Matt. 9:29). Whether or not we like the concept, Christ loves to respond to us according to our faith.

I used to bristle over the idea, too, until I started exercising a little more belief and experienced completely unexpected, wonderful results. I've noted a pretty reliable ratio along the way: The less faith we have, the more we tend

to resent the concept.

I am by no means suggesting we play Let's Make a Deal with God or try manipulating Him for miracles. God is not a paid performer and would not be shy to show His disapproval over an inappropriate approach. We must be careful, however, that we don't err in the opposite extreme of faithless caution.

As you pursue the believing God journey, I suggest you make a commitment to some specific faith practices. They are ways God has given me to demonstrate externally a work He is accomplishing internally. I call this first faith practice "raising your shield of faith."

The well-equipped ancient warrior didn't wait until he was facing the fiercest battle of his life to learn to use his shield. He practiced in advance.

God taught me a specific way to practice taking up my shield of faith, and I use the method constantly in and out of heated battles. He equipped me with a five-statement pledge of faith that encompasses virtually everything we're challenged to believe.

- God
is who He says He is.
- God
can do what He says He can do.
- I
am who God says I am.

- I
can do all things through Christ.
- God's
Word is alive and active in me.

Though I often say these five statements silently to myself, I thought of a way to outwardly symbolize raising my shield of faith by acting out physically what I'm committing to do spiritually. I raise my right arm and hold out my hand like a shield. I then put up my thumb and declare, "God is who He says He is." I add my index finger and proclaim, "God can do what He says He can do." Adding my third finger, I say, "I am who God says I am." With my fourth finger I state, "I can do all things through Christ." My little finger completes the shield as I say, "God's Word is alive and active in me."

I put an exclamation mark on the end of my five-statement pledge of faith by using sign language with the words "I'm believing God." With the index finger of that same hand, I point to my heart and say, "I'm." I point to my forehead and say, "believing" (because faith is always an exercise of the will, not the emotions). Then I point upward toward heaven and say, "God."

I practice this exercise in my house by myself, on walks with my dogs, in my car, at work with my staff and anywhere else I can get away with it. As I make

each statement, I can literally feel supernatural strength building within me.

These statements are so ingrained in my mind that when Satan attacks me, I immediately begin tallying which statement he's trying to defy and call it out.

At times when I'm in a public place where I'm not free to act it out and someone or something is trying to talk me out of faith, I do the simple sign language as I think to myself, "Say what you want, but I'm (pointing to my heart) believing (pointing to my head) God (pointing to heaven)." My spirit quickens just telling you about it.

I've also taught this method to my classes in Houston, and if you want to experience a supernatural surge of God's Spirit, you ought to try proclaiming the five-statement pledge of faith with a few thousand others! Any time someone makes fun of me or tells me I'm too radical and demonstrative for them, I have the same thought:

"Beloved, I was once the most bound-up, defeated believer you've ever met, and now I'm a walking miracle experiencing the power of God. With all due respect, how's life going for you?"

Sometimes God demands radical measures when He wants to bring about radical results. I may look silly, but to the glory of God alone, something's working.

This woman should have been a lost cause. I think I'll declare it until I die.

But even if you repeat it for only a number of weeks, I pray the practice will help you become a woman who believes God.

Beth

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Bible teacher. **Dale**

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contributed to this article.