

Faith “in this World”

John 16:32-33

This summer we have been studying passages in the gospels that demonstrate how faith moves the hand of God. For example, in Luke 7 we saw that the centurion believed that Jesus had authority to heal his servant; he believed that all Jesus had to do was “say the word” and he would be healed. That is what happened. Jesus was amazed at the centurion’s “great faith” - a type of faith He didn’t find in all Israel. Hopefully these passages have given you a renewed vision for what your faith can and should be.

But there will inevitably be times when we will be discouraged and feel like a complete failure spiritually. We sin in ways that make us wonder whether or not we are disqualified from ever having “great faith.” And sometimes walking with God is so hard that we wonder, “Is God punishing me for my lack of faith?” In other words, we are in exactly the same boat as the original disciples. We need to hear the exact same thing that Jesus told them the night before He was crucified.

Today we wrap up our series from on faith we are going to study the last few verses in John 16. This passage assures us that Jesus is not surprised by our lack of faith; Jesus is not shocked by our failures and weaknesses; and Jesus isn’t punishing us through the troubles that we experience. Instead of pushing us away from God, these things should prompt us to trust Him in deeper ways.

This exchange between Jesus and His disciples recorded in John 16 occurred in the Upper Room the night that Jesus was arrested. When we read the gospels, we see that the disciples had a hard time understanding Jesus’ teaching. But on this night Jesus had also spoken to them very plainly and directly. This moment of clarity prompted them to declare their faith in Jesus.

29 His disciples said, “Lo, now You are speaking plainly and are not using a figure of speech. 30 Now we know that You know all things, and have no need for anyone to question You; by this we believe that You came from God.”

In verse 30 the disciples declare their faith in a couple of specific ways. First, they express to Jesus, “We know that You know all things.” Jesus had an exhaustive knowledge/understanding of what was happening in the world. We will see later in the passage that Jesus even knew their future, both their failures and their successes.

Second, they told Jesus, “by this we believe that You came from God.” This is something Jesus had told them over and over. “If you have seen Me, you have seen the Father.” The disciples have come to the place where they understood and believed that Jesus had come from God.

Verse 31 is probably something of a mild rebuke to the disciples.

31 Jesus answered them, “Do you now believe?”

Jesus isn't denying that they have faith (that they believe). But He wants them to see that their faith is limited and inadequate for what they will face in the future. Their faith would need to grow and mature.

The same thing is true for each of us who believe. Sitting here on Sunday morning, I suspect that most of us would say, "Jesus, I believe that You know all things. I believe that you showed us the Father throughout your earthly life. You died for our sins on the cross and then you rose bodily from the dead." That is an expression of foundational, saving faith. At the same time, our faith needs to grow and mature. We will face things in the future that require greater faith. This is true whether you've believed in Jesus for a week or a decade.

Jesus wanted His disciples to know that He knew that their faith was inadequate so that they wouldn't give up before their faith matured.

Jesus understands our weaknesses and failures in this world. (John 16:32)

Verse 32 Jesus gives a rather sober assessment of the disciples' spiritual strength. Even though they did have faith, they wouldn't stay close to Jesus when He needed them the most. They would temporarily defect.

32 Behold, an hour is coming, and has already come, for you to be scattered, each to his own home, and to leave Me alone; and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me.

This isn't Jesus being pessimistic or unkind. This isn't Jesus wasn't setting Himself up so that He could say, "I told you so!" The disciples needed to know that Jesus understood their weakness. He was grieved, but He wasn't shocked when they all scattered and left Him all alone at His trial and crucifixion. At the end of verse 32 He adds that He is not alone in an absolute sense because "the Father is with Me." The Father would accompany Him to the cross to fulfill His mission.

C.H. Dodd made this statement about these first disciples:

"It is part of the character and genius of the Church that its foundation members were discredited men; it owed its existence not to their faith, courage, or virtue, but to what Christ had done with them; and this they could never forget." (cited in Lane, *John*, p. 713)

Their failures didn't disqualify them; their failures made them more dependent upon Jesus and His work on their behalf. When their faith failed and they were scattered, instead of giving up, they needed to grow and mature in their faith. Think about Peter's experience. After Peter declared that he would lay down his life for Jesus, Jesus informed him (John 13:38):

38 Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for Me? Truly, truly, I say to you, a rooster will not crow until you deny Me three times.

When Peter denied Jesus three times, the rooster crowed and Peter remembered Jesus' prophecy and "wept bitterly" (Luke 22:62). Peter's failure didn't destroy him (as did Judas); his failure humbled him. Jesus had also told Peter, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31-32). Surely Peter would have remembered that Jesus had made provision for his failure through His prayers. Somehow Peter's failure was part of Jesus' curriculum for him. No failure and no weakness would take Jesus by surprise.

Interestingly we find these types of assurances throughout Scripture. In Psalm 103 we are told that the Lord "knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust" (Psalm 103:14). In the New Testament, we are told this in Hebrews 4:15–16:

15 For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. 16 Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Among other things, this means that because He became one of us, Jesus has an experiential understanding of our weaknesses and our temptations. He "gets" how hard it is to live by faith in this world. In ways that we can't fully comprehend, because of His incarnation Jesus is now a high priest who is uniquely qualified to represent us before the Father. The help He gives *to* us and the prayers He prays *for* us are fueled by His experience as a flesh-and-blood man.

All of this suggests that Jesus isn't at all surprised by our failures and weaknesses. He "knew all things" about you before He called you to Himself. *You* may be shocked at your weaknesses and failures, but Jesus isn't. He knew you exhaustively before you ever had faith. In other words, Jesus looks at you the same way He looked at His original disciples. He knows how you will fail Him, yet He loves you anyway.

Note: None of this should be taken as an excuse to sin; Scripture never suggests that because Jesus is never surprised by our weaknesses and failures that we're not responsible for our choices and our behavior. But this does put our weaknesses and failures into the larger context of the mercy and grace of God. When you fail and when you sin, repent and learn how to trust Jesus more fully.

Jesus gives peace and courage in the midst of troubles. (John 16:33)

After predicting the disciples' failure in verse 32, Jesus' words in verse 33 must have been a powerful encouragement to His disciples.

33 These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world."

“These things I have spoken to you” is a reference to Jesus’ teachings in John 13-16 (which we call the Upper Room Discourse). When we studied these chapters earlier this year during Lent, we saw that the core promise Jesus made to His disciples was His personal presence. He told them that they would never be alone. He and the Father would dwell within them through the promised Holy Spirit. One of the many things that the Holy Spirit would do was give them a deep, abiding peace. In John 14:27 we read that Jesus said this to His disciples:

27 Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.

Jesus promised to give them a deep abiding sense of personal peace. The opposite is a troubled, fearful heart. Remember that Jesus spoke these words the night before His crucifixion. Even though He was about to be arrested, falsely accused, tortured, and crucified, He is assuring His disciples that He was leaving them a type of peace that would transcend their circumstances in this world.

Jesus had “spoken these things” so that when they experienced tribulations they could recall Jesus’ promise of His presence and of His peace. Notice again in 16:33 how Jesus contrasts what they would experience in Him with what they would experience “in the world.”

33 These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.”

“The world” represented “the moral order in rebellion against God” - everything that is not yet under the reign of God. This disciples would soon experience that “in the world” they would have tribulation (troubles). The New Testament makes clear that troubles/tribulations are the norm for Jesus’ followers in this world. For example, we read this about Paul’s ministry in Acts 14:

22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”

In Romans 5 Paul even wrote this about his own tribulations (which included beatings, stonings, and imprisonments):

3 And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance;

When Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica, he reminded them of their initial experience of tribulation when they believed the gospel. We read this in 1 Thessalonians 1:

6 You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit,

They experienced great opposition when they received the gospel. But they also experienced great joy through the Holy Spirit.

Back in John 16:33, Jesus' tells them very directly that they would have tribulation/ troubles. But notice what He commands next:

33 These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world."

Instead of being fearful and anxious, Jesus commands us to "take courage" (or have courage). How is that possible when we legitimately face all sorts of troubling situations? Our courage comes from the fact that Jesus has overcome the world; His death and resurrection have won the victory over the world. In other words, the kingdom of God will be established one day; it is not in doubt.

Our courage and our confidence comes from understanding and believing this spiritual reality - that Jesus has overcome the world. Our faith grows when we allow that reality to inform how we think about our trials and tribulations.

Example: Many of you are familiar with Joni Erickson Tada. A week ago was the 50th anniversary of her spinal cord injury that left her wheelchair-bound. She is a woman of great faith and courage. She has a voice and a platform to say things that others of us can't say (at least not with such authority and integrity because we haven't suffered as she has). Please listen to a paragraph from an article that was published this past week (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/reflections-on-50th-anniversary-of-my-diving-accident>).

Back in the '70s, my Bible study friend Steve Estes shared ten little words that set the course for my life: "God permits what he hates to accomplish what he loves." Steve explained it this way: "Joni, God allows all sorts of things he doesn't approve of. God hated the torture, injustice, and treason that led to the crucifixion. Yet he permitted it so that the world's worst murder could become the world's only salvation. In the same way, God hates spinal cord injury, yet he permitted it for the sake of Christ in you—as well as in others. Like Joseph when he told his brothers, 'God intended [my suffering] for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives'" (Gen. 50:20).

Ten words have set the course for my life: God permits what he hates to accomplish what he loves.

Joni knows that her suffering isn't meaningless because she fixes her eyes on Jesus, the One who has all authority and the One who has overcome the world. Therefore she has great faith and courage.

As you know, our trials and tribulations can either humble us and make us more Christ-centered, or they can embitter us and make us more self-centered. If you dwell on your troubles night and day. . . if you are obsessed with all the wrongs you have suffered. . . if

you continually meditate on the things that God hasn't done for you yet (instead of thanking Him for what He has done), you will be filled with fear and anxiety. I know this firsthand. But if you fix your eyes on Jesus, your faith can grow. You can have peace and courage.

This morning as we approach the Lord's table, let the bread and the cup remind you that Jesus has overcome the world. Confess your failures and sins so that you can experience a fresh cleansing. And acknowledge your tribulations so that you can take courage through the One who has overcome the world.