

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE FAITH?

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Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow me. For those who want to save their lives will lose them; and those who lose their lives for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save them. (Mark 8:34-35)

Some time ago I read about a college student who designed a lesson for a speech class. His purpose was to explain certain laws of physics and demonstrate that they are dependable. For the first part of his lesson he explained the dynamics of a swinging pendulum. His point was that a pendulum can never return to the same point from which it was released. With every swing the pendulum will return to a lower and lower position until it finally rests motionless in the center. The student then demonstrated the law of the pendulum with a small weight tied to a short rope. He let it swing and with each return he noted the lower and lower positions the pendulum achieved. Within a minute the pendulum had stopped swinging entirely. The student then turned to the class and asked if they believed in the law of the pendulum. Everyone, including the professor, nodded in agreement.

For the second portion of his demonstration the student pointed to a much larger pendulum he had prepared. Hanging from a beam in the exact center of the room were 250 pounds of weights tied to sufficiently strong cord. He invited the professor to sit on a chair atop a table so that his head would be against the concrete wall of the room. The professor climbed into the chair. The student brought the weights, attached to the cord, within an inch of the professor's nose, and asked, "Sir, do you believe in the law of the pendulum?" The professor nervously replied, "Yes, I do." With that, the student released the weights. The pendulum swung to the other end of the room, and then came hurtling back toward the professor's head. According to the law of the pendulum, the professor was completely safe. While the professor may have believed in the law of the pendulum, as it turned out he wasn't going to risk his life to prove any theory. In fact, as the pendulum reached its height, he chose to save his life rather than lose it, and jumped out of the way. The student then asked the class, "Does the professor have faith in the laws of physics?" With one voice the other students replied, "NO!"

In today's Scripture readings we meet two people who sat in a similar chair. One of them was the disciple Peter. In the Gospel of Mark, just prior to the reading we heard a moment ago, the disciples had witnessed Jesus restore sight to a blind man (8:22-26). In response to such a mighty miracle Peter spoke a resounding yes to belief and faith and trust in Jesus. "You are the Messiah. You are the Christ," he said to Jesus (8:27-30). Today's reading (8:31-38) picks up right after Peter's profession of faith. Jesus began to teach Peter and the other disciples what his immediate future held in store: suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection. He then pressed on with a startling, staggering challenge to trust him and follow: *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow me.*

Did Peter believe in Jesus? Yes, but so far he had bought into a triumphal, kingly image of God's promised Messiah. He believed the Messiah should take away suffering, not lead people into it. The Messiah should make life easier not harder. So when Peter imagined the cross hurtling toward Jesus and himself, he wasn't inclined to sit tight and see if it led to resurrection. He would chose to save himself, and save Jesus, too. Thus he rebuked Jesus. But Jesus would not budge, and answered Peter's rebuke with a rebuke of his own: *Get behind me,*

Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things. To be sure, Jesus' rebuke of Peter was blistering. But I don't interpret his harsh words to mean that he thought Peter was of the devil. Rather, Jesus meant to convey in the strongest possible terms that Peter did not belong out in front on the road to salvation. "*Peter, get behind me. I lead. You follow.*" Peter was always a work in progress, as are we all. But right here at chapter 8 of Mark's Gospel, in answer to the question of whether or not he trusted in Jesus, we would have to respond with one voice, NO!

Abraham is the other person in the hot seat today. In a nutshell, Abraham believed God had promised that his descendants would outnumber the stars in the night sky. They would possess a land and be a great nation. They would be a blessing to all the families of the earth. The challenge for Abraham would be to have faith: to trust that he wasn't imagining things when he received God's promises, and to trust that God would fulfill those promises. How did he do? Did he keep the faith?

Paul the Apostle, writing to the church in Rome, upheld Abraham as a foundational figure for Christian believing and trusting in God. One thing that Paul wanted to make crystal clear in the reading we heard today (Romans 4:13-25) is that God's promise was not the product of Abraham's fertile imagination. God was indeed the initiator, the mover, and the giver of the promise. In other words, the promise rests in grace. It is an unmerited, free gift that came from God. Abraham could do nothing to earn it or hasten its delivery. All that he needed to do was accept it, believe it, have faith in it, trust it. Did Abraham believe and trust in the promise of God? Paul had no doubt that he did. In writing to the Romans, Paul responded with a resounding voice: YES! *No distrust made (Abraham) waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God is able to do what he had promised.* Abraham was ninety-nine years old, and his wife Sarah was ninety. Abraham saw age and mortality hurtling toward them. Yet he stared straight at the reality of their declining bodies, hoped against hope in the promise, and stayed in his seat.

Now, one thing we might be honest about is that Paul's treatment of Abraham in Romans is something of a "Reader's Digest" version of the patriarch's life. It's not that Abraham never flinched at the onrush of his own likely demise. He did. St. Paul never mentions the sad saga of Hagar and Ishmael, which we might charitably describe as an example of Abraham's taking matters into his own hands and choosing to save himself. Abraham hardly lived a blameless life, but that's another sermon for another day. The point today is that the promise rests in grace, not in personal merit. So we can take an honest look at Abraham and still join in with Paul's resounding YES. Here was a real human being, warts and all – a work in progress just like you and me. Yet he is a role model of faith who trusted in God's promises even when all seemed to be lost.

What about us? What does it mean to have faith in the promises of God? First, we might come clear about what the promises of God are – and what they are not. Untold spiritual and emotional anguish can result when we mistake as promises of God that which God never promised. God never promised that life would be free of pain and suffering and grief. The Law of the Pendulum maintained that the professor would be untouched, but these things will come crashing into every life, even unto death. The cross did not fall short of Jesus. Indeed, he stretched out his arms on it. So if you are looking for God to save you from the harsh realities of life in this world, look again. God doesn't save us from the world, but in it and through it. God doesn't save us from death, but in it and through it.

What then does God promise? Listen to St. Paul in the final verses of today's reading from Romans: *But the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, but*

for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification. What Paul wants us to know more than anything else is that not only Abraham, not only the Roman recipients of his letter, but also you and I who sit here today in the 21st century can be inheritors of God's promise, which makes us members of God's family. Abraham is the father of all of us. So membership in God's family is one of God's promises. Justification, the forgiveness of sins is another. Resurrection, even eternal life is yet another. But how do we know? St. Paul wrote that it depends on faith. We will only know by resting in grace ourselves – by sitting still and trusting in God's promises. In the same way that Abraham trusted that God could bring forth life from a barren womb, so our challenge is to trust that God raised Jesus. And not only that God raised Jesus, but that God will also give life to our mortal bodies. God has given his word.

What does it look like in real time to have faith in God's promises? Here is someone who made a decision years ago that has filled her with guilt ever since, and undermined every effort she has made to consider herself a person of worth. One day she hears the message of God's offer to forgive her sins through Jesus. She *really* hears it as if for the first time and decides to trust it, to rest in it. When the same old feelings of remorse and regret come hurtling toward her, she sits tight, and does not waver concerning the promise of God. God has forgiven her, and having such faith she no longer subscribes to the accusing notions of her unworthiness.

Here is someone else in the last stages of a terminal illness. Every medical effort has been made to beat back the dread disease, but now the treatments have been exhausted and the time is short. The patient has been a person of faith. Even still, existential dread pounds at the door of his soul day and night. But hoping against hope, he trusts that the God who raised Jesus from the dead will not allow anything, even death itself, to extinguish him. The man rests in grace, secure in the faith that when he loses his grip on this mortal life, he will fall into the arms of his heavenly Father.

Here is a family in England during the blitz on Britain, when Nazi bombers would fill the sky and set ablaze entire neighborhoods. During one raid a father and his small daughter ran from their burning house. Immediately out front the father spotted a deep bomb crater that might shelter them from the enemy planes roaring overhead. He jumped into the pit, and held up his arms for his daughter to follow. The girl heard her father's voice calling for her to jump, but she was terrified and cried out, "I can't see you!" The father called back, "But I can see you. Jump." The girl trusted her father, so she jumped and fell into his arms.

Today's readings challenge us to trust in the promise of God. Sometimes it means sitting tight. Sometimes it means letting go. Sometimes it means jumping into the arms of God. Always it depends on faith.

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