

Faith Amidst Adversity

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This message is about faith, and I am moved to give in the aftermath of what has recently befallen our sister Melissa. But it is not meant for Melissa, nor for the Eadie family because I have no doubt that they know it better than I can deliver it. Rather, it is meant for those of us who, in the past week, sat on the sidelines watching the drama of Melissa's medical ordeal unfold and wondering "why?"

If you're hoping I'm about to tell you "why," you're going to be disappointed because I don't know "why." What I do know though is that God is in control, and He has been helping Melissa and the Eadies walk through it every step of the way.

Throughout our lives, each of us encounters trials that test our faith. Even observing the trials of others can test our faith as we are tempted to ask questions like "God, why did you let that particular thing happen? Or questions that reveal slipping faith like "God, if you are really there, why did you let that happen?" Or perhaps not questions, but statements made in anger that scold God for having bad character like: "God, I thought you were a just, a caring, and a merciful God. What kind of God are you who would let this or that happen?"

Adversities that befall us or that we observe befalling others, regardless of possible reasons or whether we know the reasons, are always tests of our faith, and we either pass the test or we do not. Over the years, I have seen some people lose their faith over such tests, and others overcome gloriously to become stronger in their faith than before. Scripture anticipates that it can go either way; if it couldn't, it wouldn't be a test. So let's spend the few minutes we have together today reviewing what Scripture teaches about faith.

Perhaps the most important Scriptures of all are the ones that define faith and tell us why faith is important. They are Hebrews 11:1 and Hebrews 11:6 which say:

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

This last verse is self-explanatory in telling us that we cannot please God by anything we do if our actions are not accompanied by faith. Let's, however, examine verse 1 which is not as self-evident, and that tells us what faith is.

The very first word in the verse, the word "now," has been the source of much theologizing because it corresponds to a specific Greek word, and the casual use of "now" as a lead-in word is not common in a Greek sentence. An unnamed commentator put it this way: "Faith is NOW,—not after the fact has materialized!" So you can read the verse in two ways by giving different emphases to the word "now;" you can read it: *Now "faith is the substance of things hoped for.."* or you can read it: *"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for.."* I don't know if the

commentator is right in his emphasis on the word “now,” but he is consistent with the rest of the verse, so let’s look further.

“*The substance of things hoped for.*” I have two thoughts about it. First of all, I don’t have to personally hope for something in order to exercise faith for it. It is enough that God wants it to come to pass. Second, “hope” in this verse of Scripture is needed as a target for the faith. Someone has to hope for something in order for it to be important enough that we are willing to exercise faith for it. It wouldn’t make sense to exercise faith for a yellow butterfly with brown spots to settle on a rose petal unless someone wanted it to happen.

The word “*substance*” is used. Does that mean that faith is literally a substance? Once again, we are faced with English versus Greek usage where English allows the word “substance” to refer to tangible materials such as water and, at the same time, to also mean something similar to the word “essence,” but with the connotation of unmistakable reality. “Word of Faith” proponents such as Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland like to emphasize the word “substance” because one can make use of a physical substance in order to cause a desired result, and they preach that we should make use of faith to gain desired ends in much the same way. I am opposed to that point of view except in cases that are clearly within God’s will such as praying in “faith” for healing.

Now the word “*evidence*” is a very key word in this verse. Evidence is something so real that it can be “detected” by our senses – something we can touch, taste, feel, smell, see, hear, and often measure and record with instruments. Evidence is what we consider trustworthy to lead us to truth. In a court of law we convict and acquit based upon evidence. So by Scripture saying that faith is “evidence,” it is inferring that it is very real and is trustworthy to lead us to truth.

The verse says that faith is “*the evidence of things not seen.*” How extraordinary! Most evidence we do “see” – either with our physical senses (eyesight being one of them) or more recently perhaps, with scientific instruments. But this faith thing – although it is so real as to be evidence, it is evidence of what we cannot see through our normal faculties.

When I burn my hand on a hot stove, the evidence of pain causes me to withdraw my hand quickly. I do not then doubt that the stove was hot because I am, in effect, “seeing” the pain through my sense of feeling. If I see a missile being hurled toward me, I jump to the side to avoid being hit. My seeing the moving missile is evidence that I trust, so I react. But Scripture says that although faith is evidence (inferring also that it is trustworthy), I cannot see it in the natural. What then is evidence of things not seen in the natural and yet so trustworthy that we are willing to act on it? There can be only one thing, and that is the voice of God revealing His will.

Bottom line: No matter how badly I want something, I cannot exercise godly faith for it if I have not first heard God say that He also wants it and intends to give it to me. I use this kind of thought process when I am deciding what to pray for, because I want to pray with faith and have it be effective. The first thing I ask myself is: “Have I heard God say if I pray for such and such that it will come to pass?” If I have, I can pray for the matter with confident expectation. If I have not heard God say it, I may still pray with hope if it is my desire, but it will not be with

confident expectation of the outcome because I know that a key ingredient of faith is lacking; that ingredient is having heard God's voice in advance.

There is, by the way, a Scripture corollary to Hebrews 11:1 that also shows faith and sight to be opposites; it is 2 Corinthians 5:7, that says:

For we walk by faith, not by sight.

I find this Scripture particularly useful for giving counsel against making major decisions based on feelings rather than on determining God's will. We have already seen that "sight is not just "eyesight," and that our feelings are a form of sight because they respond to stimuli and give us information about the outside world. I hope that by now you clearly see that governing our conduct and actions by sight (i.e. how we feel about things) is contrary to the exercise of faith.

There is a false teaching about faith that I want to warn you against; it is a misapplication of the conversation between Yeshua and His disciples that is recorded in Matthew 21:18-22:

Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again." Immediately the fig tree withered away. And when the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither away so soon?" So Yeshua answered and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' it will be done. And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."

Here is another Scripture like it:

Mark 11:24: *Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them.*

Some would say that these Scriptures stand for the principle that if we want anything, all we have to do is dredge up enough belief for it and God will give it to us. So we have people squinting their eyes in prayer, trying to visualizing the thing they want, and repeating over and over: "I believe. I believe. I believe." Now come on! Does that sound like the God we know? A god who is willing to be manipulated into giving anyone what he or she wants? It doesn't to me, and here is another Scripture reminding us that effective prayers of faith must be according to God's will:

1 John 5:14-15: *Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.*

But back to Matthew 21 and Mark 11: The key to understanding the Matthew 21 Scripture is the qualification: "if you have faith and do not doubt..." We have already discussed what is needed

to have faith, and that is to first hear the voice of God telling us what God wants so we can pray according to His will. But there is this other matter that is equally as important, and that is that when we do hear God's voice we believe Him and trust Him.

Here is another situation in Scripture where Yeshua chastised His disciples for not believing God:

Matthew 17:18-20: And Yeshua rebuked the demon, and it came out of him; and the child was cured from that very hour. Then the disciples came to Yeshua privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" So Yeshua said to them, "Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.

There is no question that, in this situation, God wanted the demon out of the child. I am sure the disciples knew that, but they did not trust that God would actually do it. We see from these examples that faith requires basically three things: (1) Hearing the voice of God say what He wants; (2) Believing God; and (3) Acting on God's voice. Whoa, where did that third requirement – "acting on God's voice" come from? From James 2:17:

Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

I would be remiss not to share these other two important Scriptures on faith with you:

Habakkuk 2:4: *Behold the proud, His soul is not upright in him; But the just shall live by his faith.*

1 Corinthians 2:4-5: *And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.*

Okay, let's now let's briefly get back to Hebrews 11:6 that I mentioned but skipped over earlier because I said it was self-evident; it reads:

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

God views our not having faith in Him as very serious because not having faith in God does not mean doubting His existence; it means doubting His character to honor His Word and do what He says He will do. That's why Romans 14:23 says:

But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.

I am speaking to a room occupied by people who do believe God, so let me put it this way. Suppose someone you know lacks faith and you want to help him solidify his relationship with God; what should you do? One thing you can do that does not require either his cooperation or

his knowledge is to pray for him. And I don't mean just once; I mean consistently. Another thing you can do if he will let you, is expose him to the written Word of God as often and in as many ways as he will accept it. That is because Romans 10:17 promises us:

So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

Up to now I have shown you that sight and faith are opposites; stating it in the extreme, if we have total knowledge and understanding about something, we have no need whatever to rely on God. For that reason, I am very content to not know many things so I can relax in His care.

Moving along slightly, there is another thing that is the opposite of faith and that is fear.

2 Timothy 1:7 assures us that:

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

Think of it logically and you will see it. When we fear something it is because we are not, at that moment, putting ourselves in God's care and trusting Him. And the opposite is true as well; if we completely trust God with any area of our lives it is impossible, at that moment, to be afraid.

Fear seems like such a natural thing, and it is for short periods of time and when it is in response to real danger. But when it dominates or diminishes the quality of life, it is not consistent with having faith; it is the spirit of fear that we are warned about, and we need to cast it out of us aggressively, using the biblical tools of love and faith. Consider these applicable Scriptures:

1 John 4:18: *There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.*

Mark 4:40: *But He said to them, 'Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?'*

Psalms 56:3-4: *Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You. In God (I will praise His word), In God I have put my trust; I will not fear. What can flesh do to me?*

Let's take a look at some of the circumstances that can cause fear. They can be severe, and they can involve severe loss. I lost both my parents when they were elderly, but I lost my younger brother to heart disease when he was relatively young. After each loss I felt somewhat disoriented – it was unreal that someone who had been there all my life was no longer there. I knew my parents were with the Lord, but that did not counteract the emptiness in my heart. Because I knew they were with the Lord I was not grieving for their sakes, but for mine, and I was comforted by Romans 8:28 that says:

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

It's hard to see how God will turn some things for good, but He will. We recall Joseph's plight on his being taken captive and sold into slavery by his brothers. Much later on when Joseph gained prominence in Egypt and was reunited with his brothers, he said to them:

Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive. (Genesis 50:19-20)

Joseph said it then, but can you imagine how abandoned and alone he must have felt when he was first abducted? These things are put in Scripture so we can learn from them. Psalm 27:1 reminds us:

The LORD is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

And Romans 8:31:

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?

This is a time in history of considerable political and financial instability and unrest both in the world and in our country. On top of that there are evil-doers, natural disasters, and personal hardships, sicknesses, and losses. None of these are we able to explain to our satisfaction, but they are all predicted in Scripture, which tells us that the way to overcome them all is through faith in God. In our ability to exercise that faith, we have an enormous advantage over those who do not believe; still, we must reach out and make it a reality in our lives or it will have no value.

In these final months of 2011, I pray for God's protection over Ohev Yisrael, and for an abundance of supernatural faith imparted to our entire Ohev family.