

John 3:14-17

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

John 14:1-7, 25-27

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

Romans 8:28-39

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Faith is one of those things that we talk a lot about, but rarely explain. We're told that faith is a good thing, and that we should have some. It's one of the three cardinal virtues – Faith, Hope, and Love.¹ We're told that we should have child-like faith, but then nobody explains that, either.

We are told that we are saved by faith, but that's one of those phrases pious people like to say, and then go on, as if that explained everything. If we're honest with ourselves, that makes things as clear as mud. We know it's connected to belief, but it's not clear how.

All too often, when bad things happen, some people, never the people directly affected, mind you, hold out personal faith as a solution. “Well, you know, if she just has faith, I'm sure she'll get better.” And then, when the disease does not retreat, the implication is that she didn't have enough faith, and that makes it a personal failing. That means that the people talking about faith believe that they don't have to think about that this bad thing could happen to them.

Faith as personal belief is important, and personal belief is powerful. It does not allow people to do miracles like we read about in the Bible, but it has power to do amazing things. To speak truth to power, when, as usual, power does not want to hear the truth. To comfort those who are wounded, even when you cannot truly understand what they have been through. To keep going, even when all those around you are falling back.

Personal belief has its limits, though. Personal belief can inspire, but it is not always enough. Belief can help us to shape the world in the way that it ought to be, as long as it lasts. But, if you've been through enough bad stuff, you know that personal belief and faith will eventually fail you. Not one of us has the perfect faith that Jesus had and has.

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:13.

If you have truly never been to the point where your personal faith has failed you and you didn't know what was going to happen or how to carry on, then you have lived a truly blessed life and I am happy for you. But I feel it is my duty to warn you, even if you believe that I don't understand your life and that I'm speaking church-speak nonsense, that that means the difficulty setting on your life has been set on "Easy." Your life is not over, and harder times may come.

If you have been to the point where your personal faith has failed you and you didn't know what was going to happen or how to carry on, then you know.

There is no shame, incidentally, in getting to that point. It does not make you a bad person. It does not make you a bad Christian. It does not make you a weak person.

The truth is that there is no love without vulnerability. When you genuinely love someone, you give them the power to make you happy. You also give them the power to hurt you, on purpose, or accidentally, or even simply by leaving your life. Those are two sides of the same coin. The more you love, the more vulnerable you are. Love is worth it, even though it does mean you will be hurt, sooner or later. So, if you have gotten to that point, it means that you love someone, and that something very bad has happened. That makes you human.

I am speaking from experience. I have been to the point where my faith had failed me and I had no idea what would happen next or how to carry on. When I was a younger man, I made some poor decisions, mostly because parts of my life had, up until then, been on an Easy difficulty setting, and, well, as they say, pride goes before destruction.² My life imploded, and I was stuck in a very bad situation until I asked for help.

Even Jesus said from the Cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"³

² Proverbs 16:18

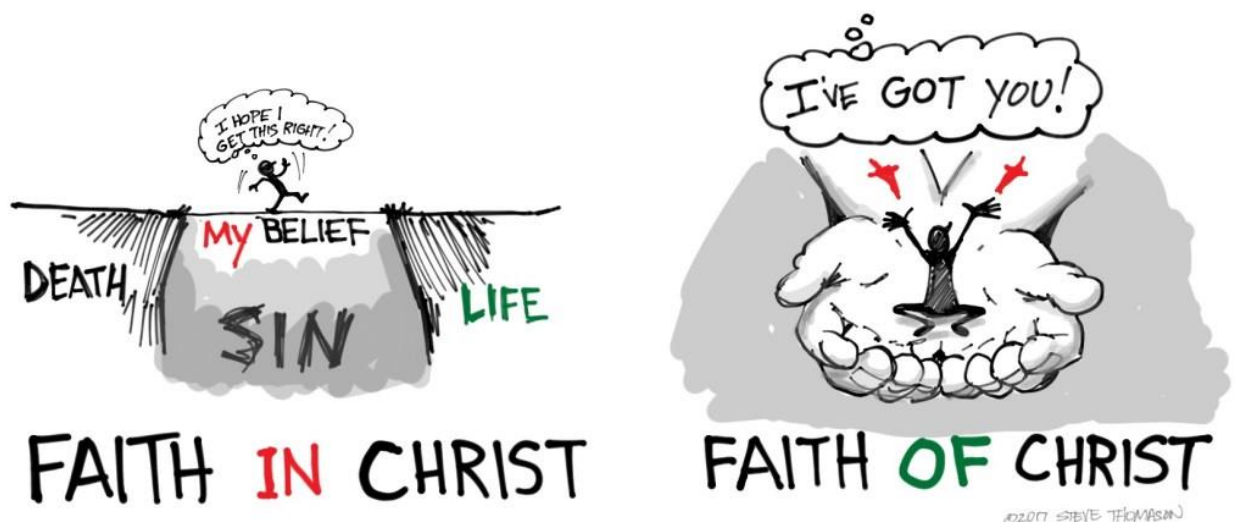
³ Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34. The quote is from Psalm 22:1.

So, if you have been to that point, or if you are at that point right now, then, in the name of Jesus Christ, I am giving you permission to admit it.

Even if you can't admit it to anyone else, admit it to yourself and to God.

If you have been to the point where your personal faith has failed you and you didn't know what was going to happen or how to carry on, then you know that that point is where God's presence is most visible to us. I generally talk about this in funeral sermons, but it is true whether there is a funeral service involved in your situation or not.

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An Internet acquaintance named Reverend Steve Thomason drew this cartoon this week, and it illustrates the difference between faith as our personal belief and the faith of Christ. On the left is faith as we are often encouraged to see it: the power of our own personal faith, part of our character, carrying us over the chasm of sin from death to life.

⁴ Used with permission:

https://www.facebook.com/groups/NarrativeLectionary/permalink/1460737240630319/?comment_id=1462582597112450&reply_comment_id=1462591547111555¬if_t=group_comment¬if_id=1500730156369791

Doesn't that look good? Doesn't that look comfortable? In this picture, provided we have sufficient faith, we can count on the power of our belief in Jesus Christ to save us. Anyone who does not have enough belief to get through it on his or her own must be a "weak Christian," or "have weak faith."

This left-hand picture is appealing, and comfortable, and wrong. Steve knows it. He drew it to make this point.

We were never intended to get through life completely on our own. Those so-called "public atheists" who say that God is unnecessary to live a good life are either simply wrong, or deluded. Either their lives have always been on that Easy setting, and they have never faced huge difficulties, or they misunderstood what happened when they did. Christians who live like this picture, with everything depending on personal belief, are living like atheists. They "have confidence in confidence alone,"⁵ and faith in themselves.

Look at the right-hand picture. In this picture, we are not claiming to be living life entirely under our own power. We are relying on the faithfulness of Christ, and allowing him to catch us when we fall. That is what faith truly is.

It is not simply belief in God. Even the demons whom Jesus cast out of people knew who he was and that he had power. That belief did not make the demons Christians, or good, or blessed. It is following Christ and relying on him that does that.

God calls us to love our neighbors and even our enemies, but we tend toward being fearful, rather than reckless; toward cowardice rather than courage. An economist named Steven

⁵ "I Have Confidence," *The Sound of Music* soundtrack (1965).

Levitt did a study a few years ago.⁶ He found several thousand people who were agonizing over difficult decisions, like job offers and marriage proposals. He talked these people into letting him make the decision for them — with the flip of a coin. Heads meant to decide in the affirmative; tails meant to decline. When he gave them “heads,” he found that people were much more likely to decide, “Yes,” than otherwise, so the experiment succeeded.

But the interesting result was the participants’ happiness. In follow-up interviews six months later, Professor Levitt found that the average “heads” person was significantly happier than the average “tails” person.

Even a *New York Times* columnist, describing this experiment, said that “Our sin tends to be timidity, not rashness.”⁷ Yes, a *Times* economic columnist talked about sin.

If your view of the world and how it works is the left-hand picture, then timidity makes sense. Deep down, whether we want to admit it or not, we know that our personal strength is limited. Deep down, we know that we are vulnerable to loss. This makes it rational not to try things that are too difficult, because we know that we could fail.

But that is not how the world works.

Look at the right-hand picture. Yes, it may seem like the world works like the left-hand picture shows, but it does not. It seems that way when we have everything under control, or believe that we do.

When we acknowledge that we don’t have everything under our control, that we need to be held in God’s strong, loving hands, that is when we see that we are already there. The God

⁶ First proposed at <http://freakonomics.com/2013/01/31/would-you-let-a-coin-toss-decide-your-future-full-transcript/>. Full disclosure: I was a participant in this experiment.

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/21/opinion/how-the-modern-world-made-cowards-of-us-all.html?smprod=nytcore-iphone&smid=nytcore-iphone-share>.

who created the Universe, including you and everything you have ever seen, heard, touched, or tasted, loves you and wants you to be all right.

Our own confidence and belief are good things, and should be developed. They will get us through many trials and tribulations. But they are not enough. We must rely on God. And God will be there.

Your homework question this week is this. What loving, caring thing would you attempt, if you truly knew in your bones that God would make sure you were eventually all right, no matter how it came out?

What's stopping you?

AMEN.