

DEVELOPING FRESH, VIBRANT FAITH

By Bob Young

Our human tendency is to build our faith in God on what we already know

Here we come to a basic problem of faith. How do we trust God to do things we have never seen or imagined? How do we learn to depend on God for new things that are beyond our past experiences? God can do exceedingly abundantly beyond all that we ask or imagine (Eph. 3:20-21). Our tendency is to define what is possible by faith on the basis of our past experiences (and the experiences we have observed in others). How can we break out of the “faith limit” most of us have learned to construct our church experiences? How can we move into areas of faith where we have no categories to help us think about what God wants and all that he makes possible?

The Bible does not tell us what Noah thought when God told him to build the ark. We have to use our imaginations. Noah did not have a mental category for an ark. He had never seen an ark; he had only God’s description of what God was instructing him to build. Noah obeyed, based on nothing he had ever seen or heard or experienced previously. This aspect of Noah’s faith has been called the “unprecedented” quality.

With limited knowledge and understanding, but with supreme faith in God, Noah did everything just as God commanded him. Many Christians want God to reveal the entire path (or at least the second step) before they begin the faith journey. My experience as a preacher, evangelist, missionary, and Christian tells me that God does not work that way. I have discovered that when I begin with confident faith that God will provide, then God shows me the next steps and he provides the necessary resources. If I do not begin, nothing happens. God does not take my inaction and turn it into something. God takes my faithful, small beginnings and works in and through me to accomplish far more than I can think or imagine.

God calls me to obey what I understand of his revealed will, and with that obedience he gives me additional insight, opportunities, and abilities. This is where many Christians and many churches get bogged down spiritually. Many are waiting on God to show them a new project when God is calling them to open their eyes, see the possibilities; dream new dreams that take God into account, and start down the path by taking the first steps. Here is the difference. We say: God show me something and I will obey; God says: Obey and I will show you something.

Developing faith that can go further

If most follow Christ only as far as they can see, or only to the places where they have been before, how does one escape that tendency? How does one develop a faith that will go where it cannot see? Biblical faith does not depend on sight. How does one reach new heights, find new possibilities, and explore new realms?

It requires listening to God’s word to discern God’s will. I see two extremes, neither of which will ultimately develop a faith that follows God to the utmost. First, the Bible contains instructions, examples, implications that allow us to infer certain truths, and numerous incidental references. For the most part, these tend to be concrete. Some build their entire understanding of faith exclusively on such categories. Second, the Bible also describes God’s ultimate purpose and plan, and includes general principles for life. These tend to be more abstract. Some build their understanding of faith on these generalities and ignore the first list. To discern the will of God in my life, I have had to learn how to integrate both dimensions.¹

Developing a faith that will take us further requires that we learn to deal with fear. We are afraid of doing things we have never done before. Such actions take us out of our comfort zone into unfamiliar

¹ See my work on “How to Establish Biblical Authority” for an expansion of this point.

territory. Simply summarized, FEAR is *False Evidence that Appears Real*. Often we wait until someone else has ventured into the new territory and then we are willing to follow. That is not how personal faith develops. That is walking by sight (seeing that someone else has done it) and therefore cannot be walking by faith. The church is weak and impotent when it merely clones the faith experiences of others.

In my own life, one of the areas where I have had to deal with fear is in talking to others about Jesus. By taking the first step and introducing the subject, I have seen God work through me and provide additional opportunities. I have developed confidence so that I can bring up the subject in numerous situations—restaurants, parks, airplanes, stores, and more. It does not matter what area of the Christian life we are talking about, we have to get past the fear of the unknown.

It requires that we be willing to change. If you want God to do something new in your life, you cannot keep doing what you have always done. That is true of individuals; that is true of churches. Most churches do not grow because they keep doing the same things they have always done. Usually, churches begin because someone or some group of people commits to walking by faith. Most churches quickly go beyond the exciting shared faith that characterizes the establishment phase and begin walking by sight. Developing a faith that will let us go further often requires that we do something different.

My work in God's kingdom has taken me to places I never dreamed of going. I have tried to follow unhesitatingly. Almost three decades of preaching and ministry were followed by the opportunity to work in Christian higher education. Retirement from Christian higher education led to a ministry and mission work that has grown incredibly. The ministry in the U.S. has opened doors to present the gospel and encourage churches in over half of the United States. Mission involvement has taken me to almost all of the countries of the Western Hemisphere. Some of the changes we have experienced in ministry and mission work have not been easy. Many times we could not see what God was doing or where he was leading. But God has been faithful and has constantly blessed our desire to be open to him.

It requires that we be willing to accept criticism. This is related to fear, but deserves that something more be said about it. There will always be critics. There will always be people on the shore who do not understand those who have stepped into the boat and set sail. I have learned that one must be willing to step into the conflict without seeing the resolution.

We all have the same problem. We want a guarantee before we take the first step. That eliminates faith from the equation. You may not struggle in all of the areas mentioned above. You may struggle in areas I did not mention. The point is that the faith that takes us further requires that we begin. This is what is meant by "the leap of faith." How many times has your faith caused you to leap into a new project or activity when you could see little more than a dream or a remote possibility? Following God by walking through the doors he opens wide is not faith. Faith involves squeezing through the crevices that are barely passable in order to see the wide expanses of possibilities that exist beyond.

Faith that focuses on the predictable is not faith. Hungering faith wants to experience what is unprecedented; in fact, faith cannot long endure the habitual.

Paul's description of the faith that can go further

One of my favorite Bible texts is Paul's prayer and admonition in Ephesians 3:14-21. To summarize the context briefly, Paul is overwhelmed and grateful for what God has done in his life, enabling him to declare the gospel (3:1-13). The prayer that follows has two parts. First, Paul prays for the Christians to be strengthened in their inner being by God's Spirit so that Christ will dwell within them by faith. The result is strong roots and foundations in love, comprehension of the incomprehensible love of Christ, and God's fullness within them. Second, Paul writes a doxology that ascribes glory to God forever and ever.

The power of faith is clear in the first part. Faith enables Christ's habitation with us. Faith helps us understand love. Faith commits us to God's presence and purpose. But Paul's description of faith in the second part rocks me back on my heels. First Paul says that God is powerful, capable, and able, to do far beyond what we can even hope for, ask, or think. God's capacity always exceeds our prayers. We cannot think in the same huge dimension as God can act. I can barely wrap my mind around such power. Then Paul says that God's power is unleashed in this world according to the power that works within and energizes us. This verse at least suggests that God's power is limited by the extent to which we are willing to let it work within us, "according to the power at work within us."

Our faith, or lack of faith, is huge! Lack of faith will keep us from understanding God. Lack of faith will keep us from experiencing God's fullness. Lack of faith will keep us from praying fervently, boldly, and with maximum imagination. Lack of faith will limit God's power within me. Lack of faith will detract from God's glory in the church and in Christ.

The Relationship of Grace and Faith

For many Christians, the relationship between grace and faith is a "chicken and egg" question. Which comes first? Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord, but the Bible does not give us details of Noah's previous life. Ephesians 2 speaks of salvation by grace through faith. Which is it? Is it grace that motivates faith, or faith that receives grace?

God acted when we were yet sinners (Romans 5), so in that sense grace is first. God extended grace in Christ before faith in Christ was even possible. But God did not extend grace unconditionally. Without this basic understanding, universalism is true and everyone is saved by God's extended grace. Since the Bible makes clear that not all will be saved, on what basis does God extend grace? And on what basis is grace received?

Grace was extended to Noah; grace is extended today. How does one experience God's grace? The answer is faithful obedience. God's grace is bestowed on and overflows to those who accept it. Put another way, grace is a gift. (These words have a common Greek root—grace and gift.) History is filled with illustrations of gifts that were given but never accepted—legal pardons rejected, gifts rejected, offers not accepted. Grace is accepted through faithful obedience. As Lord, Jesus has a claim on our lives. He gave his all; we respond in kind. We receive God's grace as we walk in humility (1 Peter 5). We receive God's grace as we walk in purity (Ephesians 2).

This does not mean we earn God's grace, or that God's grace is something we do for ourselves. God's grace is what God does for you that you cannot do for yourself. God's saving grace, coupled with our obedient faith (that is the only kind of faith there is—obedient faith) puts us in a place for doing good works (Eph. 2:8-10).

This faith listens to God, opens doors of opportunity, lets God work in us, see beyond what has happened in the past, goes further than we have ever gone before, escapes the routine, overcomes fear and doubt, and opens up a wide new world.

Most Christians only follow Christ to the comfortable places they have been taught by others. Most follow only as far as they can see, as far as they have gone before. Such Christians are held back by a weak and meager faith. The unprecedented quality of faith urges us to go further. I believe many Christians dream of more, hope for more, and pray for more. The difference between those whom God blesses and those who merely keep on dreaming, hoping, and praying is the willingness to take the first step into the places we cannot see!

**Thank you to Mark Batterson for some germ thoughts that gave birth to this article*