

Watch Your *Life*

Session 5: Exercising Faith

Presented by Pastor Colin Smith

I want to begin with two quotations. The first is from C. H. Spurgeon:

*Success in the Lord's service is very generally in proportion to faith.
It certainly is not in proportion to ability...
According to your faith be it unto you...
It is essential, then, that we should have faith if we are to be useful,
and that we should have great faith if we are to be greatly useful.*
(An All Round Ministry)

I find that really encouraging and I hope you do too. What matters most is not how gifted you are for ministry, what matters most is the faith that you exercise in ministry. That's good news, because all of us can grow in faith.

The second quote is from Charles Bridges:

'Expect great things; attempt great things.' This expectation is the life of faith – the vitality of the ministry – that which honours God and is honoured by God. All our failures may be ultimately traced to a defect in faith. We ask but for little, we expect but little, we are satisfied with little; and therefore we gain and do but little.
The main difficulty, therefore, is not in our work, but in ourselves; in the conflict with our own unbelief...
(Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*)

I find that really encouraging. It's easy to get the idea that the main problem is in your church or in the unbelief that is all around us in the world. But Bridges says that the main challenge we face as Christian leaders is in ourselves. It is our own battle with unbelief.

My aim in this session is to help you exercise faith in the circumstances that you face. I want us to see three things: your faith can grow, your faith will be challenged, and faith is manual not automatic.

1. Your faith can grow

Believers have different degrees of faith

The language of Scripture makes this clear.

Matthew 14:31

Our Lord says to Peter, "O you of ***little faith***, why did you doubt?"

Matthew 15:28

"O woman, ***great is your faith!*** Be it done for you as your desire."

Matthew 8:10

Jesus says to a Roman centurion, 'Truly I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found ***such faith.***'

Romans 4:20

[Abraham] ***grew strong in his faith*** as he gave glory to God.

Paul sent Timothy to strengthen the faith of believers in Thessalonica, who were facing a difficult time.

...and we sent Timothy, ... to establish and ***exhort you in your faith***, that no one be moved by these afflictions.

(1 Thessalonians 3:2–3)

Then we are called to 'put on' faith.

But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. (1 Thessalonians 5:8)

Paul speaks about believers whose faith is growing.

*We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because ***your faith is growing abundantly***, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. (2 Thessalonians 1:3)*

Paul calls Timothy to pursue faith, to go after it.

*So flee youthful passions and ***pursue*** righteousness, ***faith***, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. (2 Timothy 2:22)*

The disciples said to Jesus,

'Increase our faith!' (Luke 17:5)

And we have good reason to join them in that prayer.

Faith grows by being exercised

Faith is like a muscle. It grows by being exercised. If you break your arm and it is wrapped in a plaster cast, the muscles in your arm will weaken. When the cast comes off you will have to exercise to rebuild their strength.

Faith grows by being exercised. It is strengthened when trouble comes. The times that most challenge your faith are the times when your faith can grow. So, let's look at some of these times together.

2. Your faith will be challenged

Here are seven situations in which your faith will be challenged.

a. When you lose a trusted friend

For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia.

(2 Timothy 4:10)

Demas, Titus, Crescens: These were friends and colleagues with whom the apostle Paul worked. And when for one reason or another they were no longer with him, he found it really tough.

When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia. (2 Corinthians 2:12–13)

b. When you face an overwhelming task

This was the challenge of the spies who looked at Canaan.

And they told him, "We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. (Numbers 13:27, 28)

c. When you have been involved in a great work

He (Elijah) said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." (1 Kings 19:10)

d. When you face relentless opposition

This was Jeremiah's challenge.

*O LORD, you have deceived me, and I was deceived; you are stronger than I, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me...
For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. (Jeremiah 20:7–8)*

Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed! Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, "A son is born to you," making him very glad. ... Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame? (Jeremiah 20:14–16, 18)

e. When evil and injustice abound.

This was Asaph's challenge.

Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. (Psalm 73:1–3).

f. When there is no obvious explanation

This was the challenge for the sons of Korah.

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God. (Psalm 42:5)

g. When you are tired of the battle.

This was David's challenge.

*There was war **again** between the Philistines and Israel, and David went down together with his servants, and they fought against the Philistines. **And David grew weary.** (2 Samuel 21:15)*

Here is what C. H. Spurgeon said to his students who were preparing for Christian leadership:

Fits of depression come over most of us. Usually cheerful as we may be, we must at intervals be cast down. The strong are not always vigorous, the wise not always ready, the brave not always courageous, and the joyous not always happy.

3. Faith is Manual, Not Automatic

Luke records the story of how a storm blew up when the disciples of Jesus were with Him in a boat. The disciples panicked. They were quite sure they were going to die.

Jesus said to them 'Where is your faith?' (Luke 8:25). The disciples had faith in Jesus. They had left everything to follow Him. But when they were in the boat, they were not exercising faith in relation to the circumstances they faced. So Jesus says, 'Where is your faith? Why are you not applying your faith to the situation you are in?'

Here I would like to give you some wisdom from Martyn Lloyd-Jones. In his book *Spiritual Depression*, he has a chapter entitled, 'Where Is Your Faith?', based on the story of Jesus and the disciples in the storm.

Faith is not something that acts automatically, faith is not something that acts magically. This, I think, is the blunder of which we have all, at some time or another, been guilty.

We seem to think that faith is something that acts automatically. Many people, it seems to me, conceive of faith as if it were something similar to those thermostats which you have in connection with a heating apparatus, you set your thermostat at a given level, you want to maintain the temperature at a certain point and it acts automatically.

The principle taught here is that faith is an activity, it is something that has to be exercised. It does not come into operation itself, you and I have to put it into operation...

This is exactly what our Lord said to these men. He said: 'Where is your faith?' which means, 'Why are you not taking your faith and applying it to this position?'

When Karen and I go back to Britain we rent a car and I always choose to drive a car with manual gears. When we drive down to her family home in Devon, we come to Telegraph Hill. You can tell when you are getting close because the trucks all speed up to give them momentum for getting up the hill. When you come to a steep climb, you engage a lower gear. In with the clutch, down with the gear, and there's more power to get you up the hill.

You will have to climb some pretty steep hills in your life and in your ministry. When you come to them you have to exercise faith in relation to the challenge that you face. I have to trust God in regard to this. Faith trusts God for the hill you are climbing. It's manual, not automatic.

What are the circumstances in your life and ministry where you need to exercise faith today?

Conclusion: Two stories

I want to end with two stories. The first is the testimony of Philip Ryken, President of Wheaton College. He shares his story how his faith was tested through a time of great darkness in a book called *When Trouble Comes*.

It was the spring semester of the academic year, and I was in trouble. Real trouble. Over the course of several long and difficult weeks, I fell deeper and deeper into discouragement until eventually there were days when I wondered if I had the will to live.

Here is a distinguished Christian leader, who found himself plunged into a place of deep darkness. He describes four things that God used to bring him through. I'm going to quote what he says, because times of doubt, darkness and discouragement are a normal part of a Christian's life. Somewhere in your service as a Christian leader you are going to find yourself in a dark place. You are going to face discouragement. You are going to feel that there is no point in pressing on. Ryken says that it really helped him to know that this is normal.

Job was tempted to curse God and die. David was downcast. Elijah asked God to take his life. These men were not weak or rebellious, they were simply weighed down by the burdens of life and ministry.

Dark and discouraging times go with the turf of being a Christian leader so don't be surprised when you come to a time of darkness and discouragement. When trouble comes here are four things that will help to you: Rhythm, Friends, Worship, and the Word.

a. Rhythm

A good night's sleep, eating a healthy meal, getting proper exercise.

Ryken: "I didn't have much appetite, but I made sure that I ate something healthy every day. I pushed myself to get physical exercise, even when I didn't have a lot of energy. I tried to be present with my children: recitals, concerts, baseball games, rides to school, family dinners, bedtime. I did my work... I didn't quit but kept up the ordinary routines of daily life: food and drink, work and play, family and worship."

b. Friends

He describes how he talked with his closest friends and shared his struggles. *"Burdens are never meant to be carried alone."*

c. Worship

Ryken says that he went to worship even when he didn't feel like it.

d. Word

"Some of my best memories are the times that [his wife] Lisa... would read psalms over me until I fell asleep, quieting my anxious spirit with the true words of God."

Ryken concludes:

"The things that helped me will also help you, maybe even more than you know. They are the basic things of life: a good night's sleep, a healthy meal, going to church, talking with faithful friends, meeting with God through prayer, and meditation on his Word. The reason these things all help is because they are gifts from our loving Saviour, Jesus Christ."

As a Christian leader, you will go through dark times. Never doubt in the darkness what God has taught you in the light.

The second story comes from my own experience.

When I was serving as a pastor in London, I had the opportunity of visiting some churches in the North of England. Most of them were quite small and some of the leaders were quite discouraged.

One of these churches was in an especially poor community struggling with gangs, drugs, unemployment, and many other problems. I had been asked to speak at their service on a Sunday morning and right from the beginning I was struck by the life in the congregation. People sang. They were eager to hear the Word of God.

After the service, I had lunch with one of the elders and his wife. I told him that I had been struck by the life and joy in the people. "There's something different about this congregation," I said. "We are in one of the toughest areas in this city," he said. "Everything in life is pulling people down. So, a couple a years ago, our elders made a commitment that every Saturday night we would ask God for one thing: that there would be faith in the congregation on Sunday morning.

There was no doubt in my mind that God was answering the prayers of these elders. Here in the middle of a run-down housing estate, where hope was hard to find there was a community of people marked by faith. Anyone who came to that church would have felt it.

When you exercise faith, you will lift and help others. When you trust God, others will see it and they will be helped to do the same.

We have just one more session left in this module, so I hope you'll join me for session six when we will look at Discerning God's Will.

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