

When the Dust Clears Will Your Faith Still Be Standing?

Perhaps this is a strange way to begin a sermon, but I wonder if you've ever wondered: "Does the preacher ever have doubts?" "Does his faith ever waver?" Since I'm only human my answer should not surprise you. Yes, sometimes I have doubts. And, yes, sometimes my faith wavers.

There are four responses to doubts. Mostly I just ignore them. I am usually so busy preparing sermons or ministering to others in crisis that I don't have the luxury to entertain my own fears or the time to converse with whatever doubts or uncertainties that may have risen to pester me. Most of the time, at this stage of my life I can answer my doubts by appealing to the history I have already lived through. I can say with John Newton, "Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home," all doubts and uncertainties notwithstanding. So I accept doubts as a normal part of the human condition. I say everybody has some and it's no big deal. Besides that, I have read that some of the greatest figures in the history of the church were plagued with doubts and fits of depression their whole lives through. So, I simply choose to live a life of faith with my doubts in the background, no big deal.

The second response I have in times of doubt and wavering faith is to find relief through personal Bible reading and prayer. Paul says in Romans 10:17 ". . . faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Reading Scripture and talking to the Lord about my faith struggles, always seem to strengthen and reassure me when I find myself on shaky ground.

A third response is to seek out places and people where the Holy Spirit is powerfully present. For example, it's easier to believe and harder to doubt when I come into the church sanctuary or when I submit to the wonder of a glorious sunset or lose my thoughts in gazing at the stars. God has left His fingerprints and footprints all over His creation, and when I take the time to notice, I am always encouraged. My faith is strengthened. Visits to our church camp at Doubling Gap Center, or the retreat program I was involved in at Ashland Seminary in Ohio, or making a pilgrimage to a Promise Keepers Conference are always doubt-breakers and faith-builders.

But I didn't get to go to the Promise Keepers Conference with the guys this year. Instead, I stayed home to minister to Julie Biddle's family at the time of her death and to prepare for her funeral. Julie's sufferings and death and the struggles and sufferings of her family challenged my faith and raised more doubts than anything else I've

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been through for a long time. This is especially true because I had such high hopes. There were signs that led me to believe God would answer our prayers for Julie's healing. Several people in the family of God here at Fourth Street were separately drawn to the promises of James 5 and felt the urgency of praying for Julie with the anointing of oil. Christian friends of Julie in another church and in another place were also drawn to minister to her in this way. Julie herself requested this ministry. Many people were touched with the service of anointing and prayer that we had for Julie at her home. And, for a little while, it looked like God was answering our prayers in the way we were hoping He would.

At one point it was reported that the tumor was breaking up and was responding to the chemotherapy better than expected. But then, just as quickly, everything went the other way. The cancer reasserted itself and took Julie's life, leaving a lot of us wondering why? Surely, if anyone deserved better, she did. If anyone had good reasons to live, she did. If there were ever a time for God to show His mighty hand and remind us that He is still the great physician--surely this would have been the perfect time. As I shared with you two weeks ago this would have been the perfect time for God to answer our prayers for healing, but it was not to be.

Seeing Julie's struggles during the last week of her life and hearing of her death, brought great strain on my faith. I dreaded the responsibility of having her funeral. I doubted my ability to encourage others, especially since I myself felt so shaken. But then something happened. As I talked with Julie's family and spent time with them after Julie's death, and as I prepared the funeral message, I made an important discovery. Despite all that happened and despite my previous doubts and fears, I found myself standing on solid ground. It wasn't anything specific that I had done to cause it or to encourage it, it was just there--the Lord's gift of faith was there. I discovered that after it was all said and done, I still believed. God is good and God is great. 9/11/2001 did not change that. Hurricane Katrina did not change that, and Julie's death did not change that either. God's still in His heaven and His plan for the world will still, eventually, come to pass.

This experience reminded me of a time during my first year in seminary, where I encountered a professor who seemed to think it was his calling to challenge my faith and push me over the edge of belief if he could. I'm sure he would have justified his actions by saying that he was just toughening me up for the real world, and maybe I needed that. But I had the feeling at the time that he enjoyed his work in this regard a little too much. Midway through my first semester at Seminary, he

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had me pretty rattled. I remember driving home from school one evening and telling the Lord as I drove along: "I don't know if I believe in You anymore." But as soon as I expressed that thought, another thought popped into my head. It was an answer from the Lord and what He said to me went like this. "Whether you believe in me right now or not, Jon Neely, I still believe in you." And in the end, you see, that's what matters. In the end it's not about me. It's not about how big my faith is or how many doubts I have. It's all about Him. It's all about His love that is unconditional and His grace that is more than sufficient to meet our needs. He said, "I'll never leave you or forsake you," and He won't. My fourth and favorite response to doubt and uncertainty then, is simply to receive the gift of faith as God gives it to me, and to reaffirm the truth that my salvation does not depend on me but on Him. Deuteronomy 33:27a puts it this way: "The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms."

The context for our Scripture lesson today is interesting and important for us to understand what Jesus is saying. Jesus has just performed the miracle of feeding and satisfying 5000 men plus women and children with 5 loaves of bread and two small fish. Then, after sending His disciples ahead of him across the lake, Jesus joined them, walking on the water. The next day many from the crowd that had been fed by Jesus the day before and looking for more food, walked around the lake to find Jesus. When they finally found Him, the atmosphere was a bit testy. The people knew that Jesus didn't leave with His disciples in the boat, and there were no footprints on the beach to indicate that He had walked around the lake. John 6:25-27 report, "When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?" Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval."

After this introduction, Jesus goes on to talk to the crowd about Himself as the "Bread of Life," that has come down from heaven. In John 6:48-51 Jesus proclaims, "I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

As Jesus unveils His true mission to the world, an interesting thing begins to happen; people begin to grumble and the crowd starts

dwindling. While I don't think Jesus was particularly upset about it, (He knew ahead of time that this would happen) it has been one of my recurring nightmares. I'm up here preaching to a nice congregation and then right in the middle of the sermon, people start walking out until there is no one left to preach to. In the dream I feel totally rejected and humiliated.

In Jesus' case, the first to get upset and I'm sure to leave were those who had come for another free lunch. It is clear that this is what they wanted. Back in verse 30 the people ask, "What sign of power will you perform so that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?" Then they give Jesus a strong suggestion: "Our ancestors ate manna in the desert, just as the scripture says, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" In other words, more bread, a little manna, would be nice! When Jesus didn't comply but continued to talk about Himself as the bread of life, many in the crowd lost faith. They became discouraged. Many walked away.

There are people today who view having faith in God and worshiping God, as a path to prosperity. They believe that God guarantees that all of His followers will be successful in business and have all their physical needs and wishes met. They don't have much interest in promises about treasure in heaven. They want it all now and when they don't get it, they get discouraged and walk away from Jesus. They work for food that spoils, and when it spoils, they lose their faith and look elsewhere for something that will get them what they want. They are fair weather friends of Jesus.

The second sort of person to leave was the religious legalist. Jesus says in verse 51, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." Verse 52 says: "Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' Those who could not make the distinction between flesh and spirit, found Jesus offensive. They weren't looking for changed hearts; they wanted to be justified by keeping the laws and rituals prescribed by the old covenant. Anything beyond this violated their comfort zone.

There are people today who just want their religious leaders to tell them what to do, and when the pastor tells them that what God wants is a living relationship with them, in which they will come to hear His voice and be led by the Holy Spirit in every area of their lives, they panic and drop out.

The third group to give up on Jesus was made up of some of His followers. When it became clear to them that Jesus was talking about sacrifice and suffering, death and resurrection, they got up and walked away. Jesus says in verses 62-63: "What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life." Verse 66 reports the tragic decision of many people who had been following Jesus: "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him."

There are people today who think that following Jesus should be easy, problem free, all sunshine and roses. When they encounter conflict, opposition, the need for discipline, or personal sacrifice, they say, "I'm out of here!" "I came to Christ so life could be easier not harder. I don't want any part of denying myself, taking up a cross, and following Jesus. That road is too narrow and the path is too steep!"

After the physical bread seekers, the legalists, and those looking for an easy religion grumbled and left, Jesus turned to His closest twelve disciples and asked a searching question, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Over the past several months, I believe our faith has been challenged, tested, and stretched. There were times many of us doubted and questioned God, but when the Lord asks us, "Will you too go away?" We say with Peter, "Lord to whom would we go? You alone have the words that give eternal life." We know that following Jesus will not always mean prosperity, material blessing, and success in this world. Sometimes it may mean just the opposite. We know that following Jesus will not always enable us to see everything in black and white. Sometimes it's just the opposite. We know that following Jesus will require hard work and sacrifice; it may even mean laying down our lives for Him and for others. This has been the meaning of discipleship from the beginning. But whatever it may come to, it's all right, for it is He and He alone who laid down His life for us, forgave our sins, and will give us everlasting life.

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John 6:48-69

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