

## UNDERSTANDING FAITH

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July 29 , 2001

### Scripture Reading: John 16:16-33

Today we come to the very last teaching Christ gave to His disciples before He left them to go to the cross. I believe that the purpose of His teaching was to help His disciples grow in their faith. Jesus wanted His disciples to believe in something they had not yet understood.

Toward the end of our scripture reading we can see specifically what Jesus wanted them to believe. In verse 27 Jesus said, "...the Father Himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God." In other words, Jesus said to His disciples, "God is pleased with you because you now finally believed that I came from God." The words of both Jesus and His disciples recorded in verses 30 and 31 make it clear that the disciples had just come to believe in this truth about Jesus. Jesus had just spoken to them in a way that now caused the disciples to believe that He came from God. It's as if the disciples were saying, "Now you are finally talking to us in a way we can understand. It is your straightforward teaching that makes us now believe that you came from God."

But today I want us to understand that it was more than the straightforward teaching of our Lord that caused the disciples to grow in their faith. If the straightforward teaching had not been preceded by other things, the disciples would have not believed in the clear teaching and their faith would not have grown. We need to understand this, because the same forces that caused the faith of the disciples to grow are still at work today. Truth can be presented in a clear and concise way without there being any growth of faith on the part of those who are hearing the truth. The growth of our faith requires more than just hearing truth explained clearly. It requires other things as well, and today I want us to examine what those other things are. I want to take some time to consider with you how faith grows and develops in a person's life.

The first thing I want you to see is that the growth of a person's faith depends upon that person's awareness of truth. True faith must have truth as its foundation. Faith that is not connected to truth is not faith at all.

The truth mentioned in our scripture reading that the disciples believed is an extremely important truth. It is the fact that Jesus is God. Up until this time the disciples had not yet believed in this truth. They did believe that Jesus was the Messiah, but they had not yet believed that the Messiah and God are one and the same. In order for their faith to grow, they had to embrace new truth. They needed to believe in some truth that they had previously not believed.

It is only when we are introduced to truth that we have previously not known or understood that our faith even has a chance to grow. If we are never confronted with truth or never take the time to consider what truth is, then it will be impossible for our faith to grow.

So if the growth of our faith depends on our awareness of truth, how do we become aware of truth? The answer is, we must ask questions. We must look at the world around us and see all the things that don't make sense to us, and then we must ask ourselves, "What is the meaning of all of this?"

Maybe you thought I was going to say, "In order to become aware of truth we need to read the Bible or hear the pastor preach a sermon. And, of course, this is all true. But it does us little good to do these things unless we are looking for answers to questions that we have. For the person who is looking for answers to life's questions, the Bible is the most interesting book in the world. But, for the person who is not looking for answers to life's questions, the Bible can become a very boring book to read. Our questions about life drive us to search for truth. Without the questions, there is no motivation.

I personally believe that the main reason why we fail to see the faith of people growing in our midst is because people are not asking questions. People are too busy just trying to survive or get ahead in life that they don't take time to ask themselves, "What is the meaning of it all?" Very few questions are asked, so very few people are searching for answers. People don't feel the need for answers when they have no questions.

We must remember this when we do evangelism. We need to help people ask questions before we give them all the answers. And the same is true when we are trying to help Christians grow in their faith. We must realize that they will only grow as they seek answers to life's questions. We need to help people ask questions and desire to find the answers.

This is exactly what Jesus did in the sixteenth chapter of John. Jesus was concerned that His disciples were not asking the question they needed to ask in order to discover the truth He wanted to teach them. In John 16:5, Jesus said to His disciples, "None of you asks Me, 'Where are you going?'" We now know the answer to that question. We know that Jesus was going to the place He came from. He was going back to God the Father. But the disciples did not know this, and they were not even asking the question. So, In John 16:16, Jesus said something that made them start asking questions. Jesus said, "In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me."

Based on what we believe about Jesus, we know that these words referred to His death and resurrection. But based on what the disciples believed about Jesus, this statement didn't make sense. If Jesus' goal was to establish a kingdom, then why was He going away? And if establishing a kingdom upon this earth was not His goal, then why would He want to come back? All this seemed so confusing to the disciples. And I think that Jesus knew His words would be confusing. But, at this point, His goal was not to give a clear explanation of a certain truth; rather, it was to get His disciples to start asking questions. And Jesus succeeded, because verses 17 and 18 tell us that they began to ask over and over again, "What does He mean?" Their question made a way for their faith to grow.

When talking to certain people about spiritual things, I like to begin by using the word "truth" rather than using the word "God", because I find that there is a general acceptance that

something called truth does exist in our universe. However, it doesn't really excite me to hear a person say that he believes in the existence of truth in the universe. What really excites me is when I hear a person ask the question, "What is truth?" I remember the first time a person asked me that question. I was embarrassed, because I realized did not know how to answer that question. The fact that we have trouble answering a certain question may mean that we have never seriously asked the question ourselves. What is truth? How would you answer that question? Do you want to find an answer? When a certain person sincerely asks that question and will not rest until he finds the answer, then there is great hope that there will be growth in that person's faith. The growth of faith begins with the question.

When the disciples asked, "What does he mean by 'a little while'?" We don't understand what He is saying, verse 19 tells us that Jesus noticed their question. So now He was ready to teach them the truth, because He knew that they were finally ready to receive it. No one is really ready to receive an answer until he asks a question. The disciples were now ready, in verse 20, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth..." What truth? Jesus said, "You will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy."

Please notice that these words do not answer the question. Jesus was not going to give them the answer right away. Instead, He was going to tell them what they needed to experience before they could know the answer. He wanted them to learn the second important thing about faith; namely, faith grows through suffering.

Faith does not grow just because we give intellectual assent that certain things are true. Faith grows because we embrace the truth and experience the loneliness and sorrow that will come our way because we have decided to live according to what we acknowledge to be true.

The disciples had already begun to experience loneliness and sorrow at the time that Jesus spoke these words to them. They already knew what it meant to feel misunderstood and hated because they were people who had chosen to follow Christ. And they would know the loneliness and sorrow in an even deeper way when Jesus would be crucified. They would feel totally deserted and lost.

And we will also experience loneliness and sorrow when we decide to live according to the truth that those around us are not following. We will feel lonely, because we will be different from everyone else. And we will feel sorrow, because we will be misunderstood and even hated.

But Jesus said that the sorrow will turn into joy. Jesus did not say that the sorrow would be replaced by joy. He said that the sorrow would turn into joy. The very thing that was creating the sorrow will become the thing that will be our source of joy. It's like a baby that causes so much pain during childbirth but brings so much joy after birth. The very thing that caused the pain becomes the reason for rejoicing.

I call it the principle of the cross. The cross caused Jesus so much pain, but the cross

became the reason for joy; because, through the cross, Satan was defeated and salvation was made possible. We must take up our own crosses. Our crosses will bring us sorrow. But, in the end, our crosses will cause our faith to grow. After a person has paid a price for what he believes, that person's belief becomes even stronger. In this way our sorrow will turn to joy. And our sorrow will also turn to joy when we see that our witness has caused others to want to believe. When people see other people suffering for what they believe, it causes them to ask questions and search for answers.

For many years the Coliseum in Rome was the sight of the notorious games where gladiators killed each other as crowds of people would cheer on. But the day finally came when the games came to a stop. The beginning of the end came when a Roman citizen became so disgusted with the games that he jumped down from the stands onto the field where the gladiators were killing each other and he shouted out the word, "forbear". In other words, he shouted out to the crowds to abstain from or stop the senseless killing. As the crowds watched on, the man who just begged that the killing stop was himself brutally killed. From that day on, the games began to lose their appeal; and eventually, they were stopped altogether. Sorrow turns into joy when the sorrow causes others to believe in the truth.

So we see that faith grows when we start asking questions that will lead us to understand truth. And we see that faith grows through suffering. And then, in verses 23-27, we notice that faith grows through prayer. We need to pray, because it is God who actually makes our faith grow. It is God who causes us to understand the truth so that we will want to believe in it and pay the price to live it.

In verse 23 Jesus said, "In that day you will no longer ask me anything." Here, I believe, Jesus was referring to the day to the day when the Holy Spirit would come and guide them into truth. In that day they would not ask Jesus questions; but they would ask God the Father directly, and they would ask in Jesus' name.

In this section of Scripture, Jesus is not teaching His disciples that if they ask to become rich or live in a big house, their wish would be granted. This teaching about prayer comes in the context of the disciples asking questions that would help them to understand truth. They did not understand the truth that Jesus was speaking, and they wanted to understand. Jesus told them that the day is coming when it will no longer be necessary for Him to explain, because the Holy Spirit would guide them to understand. What they needed to do was to pray in Jesus' name to God the Father. And when God the Father hears one of His children asking to understand truth, He will certainly answer. God the Father loves to answer this kind of prayer. And He loves those who pray this kind of prayer. And we need to pray this kind of prayer, because we need God's power to help our faith to grow.

In the New Testament we read of a certain father who admitted to Jesus that his faith was weak. He said, "I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief." God loves it when He hears his children admit that, even though there is some truth that they have embraced, there is still much that they do not understand. But they want to understand and they want to believe, so they ask God to help them. When people ask in this way, they will receive and

their joy will be made complete. It will be made complete, because God will answer their question, and they will grow in their faith.

And so we come to verse 28, and we see that Jesus finally gets around to answering their question. After He explained to them what they must experience in order for their faith to grow, Jesus stated the truth directly to them. This time He did not try to hide its meaning. He spoke clearly. He said, "I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father." Jesus used one sentence to explain the truth of who He was and where He was going. We could spend another hour analyzing the meaning of this sentence; but instead, we will focus our attention on the disciples so that we can see what happened to their faith when they heard the truth explained so clearly.

In verses 29-30 we find that they believed, because Jesus had spoken the truth so clearly.

But then, look at the words of Jesus in verse 31. He said to them, "You believe at last!" A better translation would be, "Do you really believe?" Jesus knew that they were beginning to understand, but He also knew that their belief was still very immature. He was less confident in their faith than they were. Jesus knew that their belief was not strong enough to keep them from running away when their lives would be threatened.

The way Jesus responded to their declaration of faith reminds us that faith never stops growing. We should never think that we have arrived. We can always understand a truth better and believe in it stronger than what we do.

The more I think about the words recorded in our scripture reading, the more I am amazed at how beautifully Jesus helped His disciples to grow in their faith and also to understand how faith grows. He was teaching and demonstrating at the same time. Faith begins to grow as we seek to become aware of truth by asking questions. Faith grows through suffering. The higher the price we pay, the more valuable it becomes. And faith grows through prayer. It grows in the person who admits that he must depend on God to make it grow. And finally, faith never stops growing. Jesus taught these things; and at the same time, He demonstrated these things to be true in the lives of His students.

Think of how the students must have felt. They first felt confused when He said, "In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me." Then they must have felt sad when Jesus spoke of their sorrow. Then they must have felt comfort when Jesus spoke of the joy they would experience. The promise of God answering their prayers would have created hope in their hearts. But the prediction that they would run away must have caused them to have feelings of fear. It must have been an emotional roller coaster ride to hear their Lord speak these words.

And then look at the final word that Jesus leaves them. In verse 33 Jesus says to them, "I have told you these things, so that you may have peace." Peace? How can one have peace when they are being bombarded with so many emotions? How is it possible to experience peace when you have just been told by the one you love that you will lose your courage and run away? What kind of peace is Jesus talking about?

I am not certain that his disciples understood at the time. But they would understand later. The greatest peace a person can experience is to know that the One who controls all things knows me completely, even the worst that is in me.

If we really want to grow in our faith, we must experience everything that Jesus taught in this passage of Scripture. The questions, the suffering, the prayers, and the realization of our weakness must all become a part of our experience. But as we experience these things, we can know that our Savior understands everything we are going through.

It is not easy to grow in faith. As long as we are in the world we will have trouble as we struggle to grow. But the One who has overcome the world understands our struggles and He will pray on our behalf. This knowledge brings peace.

Let us never be satisfied with the level of our faith. Let us never stop asking questions so that we can learn more truth. Let us never stop praying, asking God to help us understand more truth. And when we begin to understand, let us embrace the truth regardless of the suffering that it will cause, knowing that the suffering will turn to joy in the end.