

How Can I Be Sure of My Faith?

[Alpha 2008B: Talk 3]

Introduction

What is faith? John Patton (1824-1907), a Scotsman, travelled all the way to the New Hebrides (a group of Islands in the SW Pacific) to tell the tribal people about Jesus. He was a missionary. The islanders were cannibals and his life was in constant danger. John Patton decided to work on a translation of the Gospel of John. But he found that there was no word in the native language for the English word “belief” or “trust”. No one in those islands trusted anyone else.

Eventually John Patton hit upon a way to find the word he was looking for. One day, when his native servant came into the living room, John Patton lifted both feet off the floor, sat back on his chair, and asked, “what am I doing now?” In reply, the servant used a word which means, “to lean your whole weight upon something.” Clever huh! This was the expression that Patton used. Faith is leaning your whole weight upon something. For Christians, faith means leaning your whole weight upon Jesus, and what he has done for us on the cross. We’ll talk more about this later.

But first, let’s quickly cover some things that faith is not

1. Not intellectual agreement

Faith is more than just intellectual assent or belief because it involves trust. Faith is more than just “head knowledge”.

Jean-Francois Gravelet (1824-1897), better known as Blondin, was a famous tightrope walker and acrobat. You know what a tightrope walker is right? Those people who perform high-wire acts in a circus. They walk across tightropes that are suspended high above the ground. I can hardly look whenever I see a tightrope-walker perform. I’m so worried that they’ll fall off! In fact, I once saw one without a safety net. I can tell you, I was the one whose life was in danger, cos I almost passed out cos I almost stopped breathing!

Well, Blondin was best known for his many crossings of a tightrope that was 335m in length (1/3 of a km), suspended 50m above the Niagara Falls. Been to Niagara? You’d know first-hand just how awe-inspiring they are. Blondin would be watched by large crowds. He’d begin with a relatively simple crossing using a balancing pole. Then he would throw the pole and begin to amaze the onlookers. On one occasion a Royal party from England went to see Blondin perform. He did not disappoint them. First he crossed the tightrope on stilts. Then he blindfolded. Then he stopped halfway to cook and eat an omelette! Then he pushed a wheelbarrow from one side to the other. Then he went back to the other side with a sack of potatoes inside the wheelbarrow.

Then he approached the group of Royal guests, and asked the duke of Newcastle, “Sir, do you believe I could take a man safely across the tightrope in this wheelbarrow?” “Yes, I do” replied the Duke. “Hop in!” said Blondin. The crowd fell silent. But the Duke would not accept Blondin’s challenge.

“Is there anyone else here who believes I could do it? Asked Blondin. No one was willing to volunteer. Finally an old woman stepped out of the crowd and climbed into the wheelbarrow. Blondin wheeled her all the way across and all the way back. Who was this old woman? She was Blondin’s mother, the only person willing to put her life in his hands. Faith is not merely intellectual. It involves an active step of putting our trust in Jesus.

2. Faith is not about trusting in ourselves (our own goodness, good deeds or righteousness)

We cannot claim to be right with God on the basis of our own good works. No one can achieve God's standard of righteousness. Remember, he is perfectly holy and hates sin.

We are saved by grace (unmerited favor) not by works so that there is no opportunity for boasting. We have faith in what Christ has done for us not our own good deeds or righteousness.

3. Faith is not about putting your trust in people or things.

In a religious teacher or priest. We must trust in Christ and his redeeming death not instead put out trust in men however pious, religious or exalted they may be. Jesus is the only mediator between Man and God. Our own religious leader or priest cannot save us.

In a holy building or city. In the time of Jeremiah, the Jews put their confidence in Jerusalem believing that since they were living in a Holy City, no ill would befall them. They were wrong: invaders came and conquered the city and took many of them off into exile. We should not put our trust in holy places or buildings instead of God.

In parents, relations, ceremony or community. Faith can never be second-hand or appropriated from others.

What True Faith Is

This contrasts with Christian faith which is faith in a Person (Jesus Christ) and involves not just intellectual knowledge but a relationship with God himself!

“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God”. John 1.13

The Christian is born again of the Spirit to be a New Creation in Christ. Read 2 Cor 5:17. ***“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come”***

True faith is faith in Jesus Christ and his death for us on the cross as the only and all-sufficient grounds of our forgiveness and justification. The Christian life is lived by faith in him and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The New Testament makes it clear that it is possible to have assurance of true faith and know that we are Christians and have eternal life. God wants us to be sure of our faith! He doesn't leave out relationship with him vague. You know how some human relationships are.

Recently I bumped into 2 friends who have been dating each other for almost 10 years already. I asked them when they were going to tie the knot. I've been sensing that the girl is getting very impatient. But the guy still has this “wait and see how” sort of attitude.

It's not like that with our relationship with God. He wants us to be certain of Him. And he tells us so: ***“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life” 1 John 5.13***

This assurance is firmly based on the activities of all 3 members of the Trinity.

The promises which the Father gives us in his Word

The sacrifice of the Son (Jesus) for us on the cross

The assurance of the Holy Spirit in our hearts

A. The Word of God (if you follow along in your outline, we're now at Section A)

If we were to rely only on our feelings, we would never be sure of anything. Our feelings go up and down all the time! I don't know about you, but my feelings can depend even on things like the weather and what I had for breakfast that day! You know, it's been raining for weeks already. Some of you may love the cool weather and the constant drizzle. I do – to some extent. But it's too many days already. And it's starting to make me depressed, cos I can't do things like run and swim, which I love to do. Thankfully it was sunnier today, pleasant change! Then there's breakfast. I know I'm going to have a good day when I have time to make myself 2 slices of toast with butter and Nutella, together with a nice cup of Nescafe Gold Blend. And it's a great day when I wake up early enough to fix a special breakfast. 2 weeks ago I made American breakfast pancakes for breakfast, which I had with real 100% maple syrup. Yum! But I tell you, on those days when there's no time for breakfast, I'm not in a very good mood at all and you wouldn't want to cross my path!

Thank goodness our faith is not based on our feelings – which are changeable, and even deceptive. Our faith is based on something permanent. The promises of God in the Bible, which is God's Word to us. They do not change. They are totally reliable.

There countless great promises in the Bible. I've got one very helpful one printed for you here: ***Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. (Rev 3.16)***

Jesus wants to have fellowship with us but we must let him in. Jesus promises us eternal life as the result, see the next verse. ***"I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand". John 10.28.*** This eternal life is the quality of life that comes from living in a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Again this is a fact that God has promised this. Faith can be defined as taking God's promises and daring to believe them. [See the little picture in your notes.] It's like a three part train where the Word of God in the bible is the engine. It is the driving force. Faith follows the facts, and then feelings come from the faith. They are all important and all necessary, but if have faith leading then it may be blind faith or faith in the wrong thing, and if feelings are leading then it's just a matter of time until we're feeling down and everything comes to an abrupt stop.

There's another way to be sure of our faith. Suppose you were to ask me whether I'm a pastor and how I could be sure of it. Well, I there was a particular day when I was installed as a pastor in this church. There was a ceremony, the Senior Pastor and the Elders laid hands on me and prayed for me, and there were many witnesses. This was an event in history. In the same way, I can be sure of my faith because it has a foundation in the work of Jesus. That event in history was what Jesus did on the cross. That brings us to Section B.

B. The Work of Jesus

We talked about Jesus' death on the cross last week. Let's recap it this way: ***"We cannot earn God's forgiveness, but Jesus Christ died on the cross so that we can be reconciled to God."*** Remember, we all fall short of God's standard. None of us can earn our way into heaven, but God loved us so much that he suffered and died to provide a way for us. ***"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*** (John 3:16)

Remember I gave you the story of a book containing a record of all the sin we've ever done. Well, Jesus took that sin then exchanged it for righteousness. The bible says - ***"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."*** (2 Corinthians 5:21). Righteousness means a right relationship with God.

This is a free gift that God gives to us in Jesus Christ. What do you respond when you hear of a free gift. As a good Singaporean we are very good and sniffing out free gifts. But we have also become smart and often check if there's a catch. Have you ever received a letter inviting you to receive a free holiday then you check the small print and discover that you have to attend a 2 hour sales pitch on a time share condo? Or receive a seemingly free offer in the email but on closer inspection you first have to buy \$100 worth in order to get something "free". They're not really free because there's a catch.

So is the gift of eternal life really free? The answer is that it is really free, and there is no catch. It's free, but the gift is not cheap. It's not cheap because it cost Jesus Christ his life and his suffering on the cross for him to offer this gift to us.

We can also be sure of our faith by our experience of Jesus. Some of these are subjective feelings, while others are objective things that happen in our lives. All these are the witness of the Spirit. Section C.

C. The Witness of the Spirit

When someone accepts Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, God's Spirit comes to live with them. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us the experience of God. We become aware of this through, for example:

- the enabling he gives to do God's work and to witness for him
- the help and inspiration he gives to our prayers
- the love he brings to our hearts for others
- the transformation he brings to our character.
- The deep conviction that we are God's children

Let me just focus on the final two.

So first, there is (1) transformation of our character and of our relationships. The Spirit helps us to change for the better. But what if you like how you are and you don't want to change? Let's see what the Bible says about how we will change.

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." (Galatians 5:22-23)

This is the wonderful gradual change that happens with us. There are often immediate changes within us that we can see in just a few days or weeks of becoming a Christian, while other changes take years. When we experience the Holy Spirit in our lives in this way, we can know that our faith is real.

(2) Another important thing that the Holy Spirit gives us is a deep, personal conviction that our faith is real and that we are God's child. Romans 8:16 tells us, ***The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.*** If you have ever wondered why Christians can say with such certainty that God is real in their lives when you can't see him, this is why! God gives us this certainty that we are his children.

Both these changes have a tremendous impact not just on ourselves, but also on our relationships, on people around us. Let me explain.

You see, we are all at first broken people. Let me share a bit about myself. My father passed away when I was 5 in an accident. 3 years after that, my mother remarried and kind and godly man, who became my new father. I'm very grateful to God for my dad! We spent over 4 happy years living in England, as dad has been posted there. But somehow, through my own biological father's death, I was left with a need to be approved of, to be accepted, to be loved. I remember how stressful it was to return to Singapore – I was 12 – the stress of meeting my new extended family: grandparents, aunties, uncles, cousins. For a while, I felt like an outsider, though they all accepted me and my brother like their own. You see, somehow, inside, I was damaged. This worked itself out in my late teenage years and right into adulthood through behaviour patterns like performance and perfectionism. Cos I felt that to be accepted

by others, I had to do well in all things, be perfect, and be super-nice, all the time. Classic people-pleasing behaviour. Always wanting a pat on the back.

I didn't realize I brought this into my relationship with God too. I had an imperfect understanding and experience of His grace. That he loved me just because he loved me. Not because of anything I could do for him. So I thought I had to earn His approval too! Evangelism, CG leader, worship leader, Treasurer. You name it and I was doing it in church. But later, as an adult, God brought me to a place where I realized the full extent of His grace upon my life through some remarkable encounters with Him.

Now, even as God continues to deal with me and to change me from inside out, I'm set free to love others for Him too, without any other agenda. I'm not there to prove anything: how talented I am, how popular I can be. The Holy Spirit brought me through this, so I could have this deep assurance that God is my loving father and that I am forever his child, and nothing can ever change that. The Holy Spirit can bring this assurance into your life too.

Conclusion.

Let me conclude here. Trust in your relationship with Jesus and receive God's Holy Spirit in your life, which He promises to send to His children. Put your full weight upon Jesus! I stand here and tell you that Jesus Christ is real, and that my experiences of God working in my heart, in my life, and through my life, I would not exchange for anything else. I've experienced the wonder of God's grace, and felt His love for me deep in my heart and spirit. And I know that many of the other Christians in this room have too. Ask them!

Pray: If you want to be sure of that relationship with Jesus then you can make this prayer. You can be sure that you have received this gift of eternal life and have the presence of God in your life.