

Why Faith Doesn't Work by Pastor Marty

It seems a common practice in many parts of the Body of Christ to make fun of or criticize those preachers, churches, and believers who are categorized as part of the "faith movement." Antagonists of these views will use descriptions ranging from "slightly off-base" to "anti-Christian gnostic heresy." The purpose of this newsletter is not to argue for or against the faith movement or any of its followers beyond saying five basic things: (1) The author of Hebrews clearly states it is impossible to please God without faith. The word "impossible" is noticeably strong language, so we should not dismiss it lightly. Whatever faith is, we all need it. (2) Jesus often rebuked the disciples for their lack of faith even when they succeeded in doing miracles we only wish we could do today. Whatever faith is, it is something God holds us accountable for having it or lacking it. (3) Paul makes clear connections between faith and grace, salvation, forgiveness, sanctification, and righteousness. Whatever faith is, it is foundational to Christianity. (4) Throughout the Old and New Testaments, faith is often described in comparative terms like "great," "small," "strong," "weak," and "increase," and "lose." Whatever faith is, it is not the same for all people at all times. (5) After spending a good amount of time with Jesus, the disciples asked Him to increase their faith; instead of telling them they were stuck with what they had, He stated that even a small amount of faith could accomplish miraculous things. Whatever faith is, there are things we can do about our current state in relation to it—which seems reasonable considering the 2nd point. In light of these points, we should respect those who are trying to embrace faith as both important and vital to living a Christian life. Of course, some believers or preachers may have ulterior motives, but there is no denomination or tradition exempt from that. Simply speaking, whatever faith is, we need to have it.

Whatever faith is, it is something we need to have, for it is vital to the Christian life.

In light of the mentioned premises, there are some things we should acknowledge about faith even though they may be difficult to accept: we may have less faith than we think, God will hold us accountable for the faith we have, and it is actually possible that some of the failures or delays that we encounter in our Christian experience may be due to issues related to our faith. This third statement is usually the one we are most likely to reject although it is completely consistent with everything else we affirm in our theology. Often, the same believers who are quick to assert that they cannot go a single minute without sinning in one way or another or who describe themselves in the most unworthy terms will vehemently object to any question of their faith and proclaim that any lack of an answer in prayer is a clear and absolute indication that God obviously said, "No." Realistically and logically speaking, we cannot have it both ways: if we are going to embrace a position that our sinful nature is so inexorable and irresistible that the new creation by the Holy Spirit within us cannot resist sin for even one minute, then we cannot claim that our prayers are so pure of motive and full of faith that it is never our fault if things do not happen the way we ask. Now, I am *not* saying that is always the case, for there are many scriptural examples proving there are other factors involved; nevertheless, we need to acknowledge that there are things we can do about unanswered prayer instead of just assuming that God said, "No."

There are some things we need to consider before we just assume that God said, "No."

As we read the Bible, we find that those people most elevated in scripture as heroes of the faith often had significant failures and weaknesses. Clearly, having a sinful nature does not preclude a faith that results in significant miraculous answers to prayer. However, there are instances where even they experienced difficulties and did not see answers to prayer in their own lives. Sometimes, these can be directly related to sinful actions or bad choices, such as are seen in the lives of Sampson, Saul, David,

Jonah, and others. In other cases, difficulties had absolutely nothing to do with failures, and the author of Hebrews states that their persecutions and afflictions were actually signs of their following God in direct opposition to the world around them. Nevertheless, we can see a few singular examples where it is absolutely clear that the lack of an answer was neither due to the person's limitations nor because God decided otherwise. One clear instance is seen in the life of Daniel, one of only a few people in the Bible where nothing is mentioned concerning sin, bad choices, or anything less than a profound faith.

Daniel reveals an example without sin or bad choices and with a profound level of faith.

In the 10th chapter of the book of Daniel, he describes an instance where he was significantly disturbed by a prophetic vision. He was so upset by it that he spent three weeks fasting and mourning over it, praying for God to speak to him. Many people misunderstand the purpose of Daniel's prayer. It specifically says in the first verse that he understood the message and the vision and knew it was true. His prayer was not to understand what it meant; it was anguish over not knowing how it would impact his people, the nation of Israel. At that point, an angel appears to Daniel and tells him he has come to tell him "what will happen to your people in the latter days." It is important that we realize Daniel was praying because he was distressed about the future—something which many of us know all too well. In this case, he could have given up after the first or second week, deciding God simply wanted him to trust Him and not worry; however, that is not what this passage tells us. The angel told Daniel that God answered the prayer the *very first day* he prayed by sending the angel to reassure him and resolve his anxiety, but the angel was obstructed for the entire three weeks by spiritual warfare until Michael the archangel arrived to give backup. In this case, God answered the prayer the first day, but it took three weeks for the answer to arrive. Instead of deciding that God said "No" to his request, he persevered until he had a response, and it brought greater forces into play. The delay was not due to any lack with Daniel, nor was it from God delaying to respond; it was entirely due to unseen forces that were in play.

Some unanswered prayers are not because we are lacking or because God is delaying.

In this instance, it is important to realize that Daniel was unwilling to accept "no" for an answer. This was not because he was trying to manipulate God; on the contrary, he knew God well enough to know that He would answer. Had he embraced a fatalistic theology that taught "whatever happens is God's will," he would have stopped praying after the first few days. Similarly, if he had decided what the answer was and simply "claimed it" instead of persevering, he also would have stopped praying. In both cases, he likely would not have been fasting for those three weeks, and we do not know for sure how the situation would have ended. The passage leaves us with many questions: Why did Michael not arrive to help the angel sooner? Why did God not answer another way, such as in a dream or vision? Why was the Prince of Persia adamantly intent on not letting the angel get through to Daniel with the answer—a situation not seen elsewhere? We do not know the answers to these questions, and we can only speculate about them. All we know for sure is that (1) Daniel was a man of profound faith, (2) he knew God extremely well, (3) he prayed for an answer, (4) God answered the first day Daniel prayed, (5) the answer was delayed for three weeks, and (6) Daniel continued praying until the answer arrived.

God sent the answer to Daniel's prayer the first day, but he did not get it for 3 weeks.

This passage is very encouraging because it suggests to us that unanswered prayers might really be a sign that we are doing things right. However, we have to look at the other possibility. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus summoned the 12 disciples, gave them authority to cast out demons and heal every sickness and disease, and sent them throughout Israel to proclaim that God's Kingdom—His Presence and power—had come. Although Matthew does not tell us what happened next, Mark says they came

back rejoicing over all the healings and deliverances. Shortly after this, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up on a mountain where He is transfigured. When they come down, they find a crowd with some scribes arguing with the disciples. It seems a man had brought his son to be delivered, but the disciples could not do it. These were the same disciples who earlier remarked over the demons being subject to them in His name. Jesus cast out the demon and gave the boy back to his father. The disciples, clearly remembering their prior experience, ask Jesus why they could not cast it out. His answer is significant. He did not say that the authority He had given them was just for that first mission trip, that the Father wanted to do it a different way in this case, or even that they needed to keep on praying; He said it was because of the smallness of their faith. (Some manuscripts add that prayer and fasting was required for this type of demon, but their faith was still the first and foremost reason provided in this passage). This was just one of many times throughout the gospels that Jesus rebuked the disciples for a lack of faith.

In the gospels, there are times Jesus connected a lack of miracles to a lack of faith.

Instead of being discouraged by this, we should consider this immensely encouraging. Although He at times rebuked people for their lack of faith, He likewise often told people they would receive the answer according to their faith—and the miracle happened. If the instance in Nazareth revealed that unbelief prevented Him from doing miracles, the instances everywhere else showed that the greater a person's faith, the greater the miracle they could receive. Of course, some instances suggested that something else was involved—such as His proclaiming forgiveness to the paralyzed man before telling him to arise and walk—but more often than not, He directly connected faith with the answer. Being both holy and good, Jesus would never rebuke the disciples (or anyone else) for something they had no ability to change. This means that His admonishing them for small faith indicated that they could have more faith. If He could only do a few miracles in Nazareth “because of their unbelief” while “all things are possible” for those with great faith, then nobody's faith is limited or unchangeable. In an example of profound simplicity, Jesus told the people to “have faith in God.” He would not command what they could not do. Accepting that our lack of faith may sometimes prevent our prayers from being answered actually means there must be things we can do to increase our faith and see more prayers answered.

Accepting the weakness of our faith is the first step in actually developing great faith.

In this newsletter, I have discussed two possible reasons prayers can seem to be unanswered or delayed; there are many more: Namaan's leprosy was not healed until he obeyed and dipped himself in the river seven times; the young boy was not healed at Elisha's word until he prayed a second time and tried a different approach; the Israelites continued dying of snake bites until they repented of their idolatry and looked at the serpent on the staff crafted by Moses; king Hezekiah only recovered after he was given the medicine prescribed by the prophet; the woman bent over double was only healed after Jesus cast out a demon; and even Jesus had to pray twice for the blind man before his sight returned. If there is any theological position related to prayer that is not repeatedly displayed in scripture, it is the fatalistic teaching that whatever happens is God's will. Jesus repeatedly describes this present age in terms of a fallen world where evil things happen until the new creation arrives and restores all things. Until then, we are specifically instructed to pray that the Father's will would be done on earth as it is in Heaven. If we think about it, Jesus would not tell us to pray something that would automatically take place irrespective of anything we do about it. Praying that His will “may be done on earth as it is in Heaven” implies that it may not be done otherwise. Recognizing our imperfections means we have to acknowledge that our prayers may not always be as perfect as we wish they were. Of course, God does not require perfect prayers to answer, but He may expect us to persevere when the answer is delayed.