



CHRISTMAS FAITH

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Today, let's consider the Christmas stories of Mary (Luke 1:26-38) and Joseph (Matthew 1:18-25).

This event, and a significant event it was, involving ancient prophetic Scriptures and angel encounters, did not suit this couple's everyday religious practices. In fact, it seemed to breach their common moral and social values. But it had the distinct aroma of God.

Their reactions were different, and also the same. Both of them believed God, accepted His plan, and obeyed His instructions. But outwardly, initially, their responses were different. Mary had a conversation with the angel, seeking to understand God's plan, and finally just accepted what could not be understood. Joseph said nothing; he simply arose and obeyed.

Faith Is What You Do

Faith is not what you know or agree is right (believe); faith is what you do because of Jesus (who He is and what He's done).

Each of us has a creed, a statement of what we believe. It may not be formalized or memorized, but if pressed, we could tell you what we believe to be true of God and of us (and, what we believe to be *not* true).

However, having a creed is only a by-product of faith, a function of faith, but not faith itself.

Perhaps you have heard some form of this humorous story of two men discovering how much they agreed about controversial issues:

A Christian man was walking across a bridge when he saw another man standing on the railing, about to jump to his death. He spoke gently, "Hello there. Don't jump! Tell me what's troubling you."

The would-be jumper turned to see who was speaking to him, and explained, "The world is going to hell in a handbasket. I can wait for the Lord no longer. I can't take any more. He should have come by now."

“Just a minute!” said the interrupter. “Are you a Christian?”

“Yes, of course,” said the would-be jumper.

“So am I, brother!” said the walker. “Are you a born-again believer?”

“Indeed I am,” the jumper replied.

“So am I” cried the walker. “Are you a Spirit-filled, born-again believer?”

“Yes, that, too,” said the jumper.

“Praise God!” shouted the walker. Pressing on, he asked, “Are you a tongues-speaking, Spirit-filled, born-again believer?”

“To God be the glory, yes!” answered the jumper.

“Me, too!” said the walker, excitedly, as he approached the railing. “Are you a pre-millennial rapture, tongues-speaking, Spirit-filled, born-again believer?”

“Yes. I look for the Lord’s coming every day.”

Moving still closer, the walker eagerly asked, “Are you a tithe-on-the-gross, pre-millennial rapture, tongues-speaking, Spirit-filled, born-again believer?”

“Certainly!” the jumper asserted.

“Wow! Really?” Now close enough to grasp his coat, the walker asked, “Do you belong to an Assemblies of God church?”

“No. I don’t believe church membership is important,” responded the jumper.

“What?!? Then die, you heretic!” shouted the walker, as he pushed the man off the railing.

That was NOT an act of faith!

We are churchgoers. We believe that is part of the practice of our faith. When it’s easy and when it is not. When it is comfortable and when it is disquieting. When it suits us and when it doesn’t. Whether it’s in-person or virtual.

We seek a church that shares our creed, at least its core elements. But we all put up with a lot of differences, too. And that's what church is. But merely going to church is not faith.

Faith is more than what we believe with our minds. Faith is what we do with our everyday lives.

James 1:22 (NLT)

²² *But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves.*

Inspired by Jesus

Yet, faith is more than moral or compassionate behaviors.

Faith is what we do *because of Jesus*. It's what we do because of *who He is*. It's what we do because of *what He's done*.

Who He is. As many have said, "Two words should never be spoken in the same sentence: No, Lord." In other words, if you believe that Jesus is Lord, Master, and Most High God, then your behavior will show it. You wouldn't treat such a Person with contempt or indifference or rebellion. You wouldn't tell Him, "No."

What He has done. Not simply His exemplary life, or His extraordinary powers, but particularly, His sacrificial death on the cross—in mercy, taking the place of every sinful person, taking the judgment that should have been ours, dying in our place and for our sakes. No wonder the Apostle John wrote, "*This is real love—not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins*" (1 John 4:10).

Faith is how we act because of those two considered realities: who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. Faith is what Jesus inspires us to do. Nothing less. If your good deed was not inspired by the Person of Jesus, then it was just an act of kindness. It's only an act of faith when you can say, "I would've done something different, if it hadn't been for Jesus."

A Contrarian's Road

Faith always acts, and often acts in the face of contrary feelings, thoughts, or circumstances.

If you have decided to follow Jesus Christ as Lord, you will soon discover that He doesn't ask you for directions. He is the Leader, you are the follower.

Now, He's a *good* Leader, a Good Shepherd, but He definitely chooses His own path. And that's appropriate: sheep *need* a shepherd. The Shepherd knows where to find green pasture and quiet waters (Psalm 23), even if the path between here and there is rocky and steep.

Sometimes, “rocky and steep” refers to circumstances or relationships through which we must pass. Sometimes, “rocky and steep” describes the turmoil within our own hearts and minds, which we must overcome.

James 2:14-17 (NLT)

¹⁴ *What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone?* ¹⁵ *Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing,* ¹⁶ *and you say, “Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well”—but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?*

¹⁷ *So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless faith produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.*

Saying you have faith is inconclusive. Acting in faith is what is called for. And there's no time for acting in faith like those times when the winds of outward circumstance or inward condition are blowing against you, as when Jesus is leading you toward the north, but the winds are blowing toward the south.

You cannot depend on your thoughts or feelings to agree with your faith. Therefore, you often must act *contrary* to your thoughts or feelings or circumstances. Why would you do such a thing? Because of Jesus—who He is and what He's done.

When your feelings say, “I *really* want this,” and your mind agrees that it is “meant to be,” but your faith says, “Jesus didn't do this, and He would be displeased.” To act in faith would mean to “deny yourself” (your feelings and rationale; Luke 9:23) and do what would please your Master.

When you have heard the voice of the Spirit in your heart, but your mind trembles in fear and protests, “This is asking too much! Let someone else do it.” To act in faith would mean to “cast down arguments” (2 Corinthians 10:5) and draw courage from the Lord to move forward.

Speaking Faith

Faith's first and last act is speech, for words release generative (creative) power, declaring the end from the beginning (calling those things that are not yet, as though they already were).

This is, in fact, what God does. He is the One who “*calls those things which do not exist as though they did*” (Romans 4:17). As Isaiah wrote (46:9-10): “*Truly I am God, I have no peer; I am God, and there is none like me, who announces the end from the beginning and reveals beforehand what has not yet occurred, who says, ‘My plan will be realized, I will accomplish what I desire.’*”

God's words are not simply descriptions; they have generative (creative) power. That's why the Scriptures are more than a collection of narratives and poetry—they are prophetic and life-giving. In the beginning, when there was nothing else, God spoke, and the heavens and the earth were created. What He said, came to pass.

God calls us righteous, He calls us saints, He calls us saved, while in fact, we are still being made righteous, we are becoming saints, and we are being saved. But God sees the end result before it arrives, and calls it like He sees it. How encouraging this is to me!

We should follow suit.

James 1:26 (NLT)

²⁶ If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless. ²⁷ Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.

Romans 10:9-11 (NLT)

⁹ If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved. ¹¹ As the Scriptures tell us, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced."

Biblical faith is not positive thinking or positive speaking, although it creates both. Anyone can will to speak positively, just because they want to (and hope it will turn circumstances in a positive direction). Many people would, in fact, benefit from more positive thought and speech, but those benefits will be limited (shallow and short-lived), unless they *arise from faith* in Jesus Christ.

It is Jesus (the Creator) who energizes our thoughts and speech with supernatural generative power. There is a *natural* generative power to our words, but it is relatively weak and shallow in its effect (I call this "greeting card speech"—sending "good thoughts"). To accomplish a lasting work, we need God's power, which always (and only) comes to us through Jesus Christ.

Emphatically Jesus

This is why I don't emphasize a mere positive outlook in my teaching and preaching, but a relationship with the person of Jesus Christ. Without Jesus, human faith is just wishful thinking. We need the "faith of the Son of God" operating in us, not just human expressions of confidence.

Galatians 2:20 (NET)

I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So the life I

now live in the body, I live because of the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Because of the faithfulness of the Son of God. Regardless of the contrary current of a modern culture that denies Him, or seeks to live without Him, or at least without leaning on Him.

Because of the faithfulness of the Son of God. Regardless of my own mental arguments or my sensory protests.

Because of the faithfulness of the Son of God. Let's live our lives on that account. On purpose. By faith. In Jesus.

Regaining Our Footing

If we have drifted, how can we regain our balance and solid footing in faith? There are three sources of a solid, Jesus-inspired faith: the Bible, personal prayer, and fellowship with other believers.

The last one is difficult right now in the course of beating a pandemic, but the other two are always within reach. So, we should connect with each other as often as possible, and take advantage of the opportunities we have to “provoke one another to love and good works.”

But while we are socially distant, let's not also be spiritually distant. Dig into the Bible like never before! Adopt a Bible-reading plan (there are dozens of good ones available online or through the YouVersion Bible App) and a daily devotional guide (again, tons of good ones available—but if you've never read “My Utmost For His Highest,” by Oswald Chambers, you owe it to yourself to do so). If that idea seems like too much, just read the entire chapter from which your daily devotional text is taken.

And bathe the process in prayer. Begin by asking the Holy Spirit to help you focus and see just what He wants to show you. If you have any questions as you read, lift them to the Lord for greater understanding. Finally, when you've finished the daily reading, find a way to personalize its central message in a prayer to the Lord—as a confession, or a request, or a declaration of faith, or a point of praise and worship.

A regular practice like this (even if you miss a day or two here and there) will strengthen your faith in Christ, as well as your personal self-confidence—because of Jesus; who He is and what He's done.