

# How Much Faith is Enough?

Jesus promised we would receive what we ask for if we believe. If our prayers are not answered, does that mean we're lacking in faith?

BY STEVEN MOSLEY

"According to your faith will it be done to you."

"Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted."

"Go your way, your faith has made you well."

"Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

"Don't be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed."

Glancing through the gospel narratives in which Jesus responded to various requests for help, you soon catch a common theme. The Savior spotlighted faith as the key to a petitioner's answer. Many of the miracle stories climax in a statement about belief.

Once, while Jesus' disciples were staring wide-eyed at a fig tree that had withered at His command, the Master calmly assured them: "If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer" (Matthew 21:22). This promise is so outrageous that we are inclined to check for loopholes; surely Jesus didn't really mean that.

When we claim great promises and find that our petitions are apparently unanswered, we naturally tend to fault our part of the agreement: faith. Jesus said, "If you believe you will receive." Well, if we didn't receive we must not have believed enough. We try to have more faith next time.

This approach leaves a long list of casualties. Earnest Christians have made themselves sick trying to believe intensely enough. You try hard to have faith, don't get the answer desired, feel guilty; you try even harder, fail, feel even more guilty. It's possible, in fact, to drive yourself crazy trying to manufacture enough faith. How do you do it? Grunt? Squint? Repeat key phrases over and over?

Others opt simply to bow out. We hear statements like, "I wish I had faith like hers and could really pray" — the assumption being that some supernatural gift is required, or an inherent gullibility that acknowledges the impossible as true. This kind of faith can appear to be removed some distance from anything the average Christian experiences. So, many conclude it's only for the select few.

## HEALTHY FAITH

To find a healthy response to Christ's emphasis on belief as the key to answered prayer, let's compare incidents in which He commended "great faith" with those in which He lamented "little faith."

A Roman centurion once approached Jesus in Capernaum and asked that his servant be healed. Jesus offered to go to the man's house. The centurion replied that this wasn't necessary — if the Master would just be good enough to utter a word, that was sufficient.

How could this soldier say such a thing? Because as a centurion he understood power and command. He knew he had the authority to order the troops under him to do his bidding. So he applied those facts to Christ. Abundant evidence confirmed that He could perform miracles; wide testimony affirmed His authority to heal.

The centurion did not need an obvious display with dramatic gestures and incantations to prove Jesus' power. He simply drew a conclusion based on what he knew: a word of command from Jesus could result in healing. Because of the facts on hand he counted something as true. So Jesus, looking around at bystanders who often ignored or rejected evidence of His messiahship, declared, "I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith" (Matthew 8:10).

The great faith commanded by Christ simply reaches out on the basis of certain information and counts something about the Savior as true. In this case, the centurion acknowledged Jesus as the Healer and was rewarded.

Now to a vignette of faith on the rocks.

The disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee when a furious squall came up and nearly swamped their boat. In desperation, they saw Jesus sleeping on a cushion in the stern. At this point the Twelve could have counted as true one of two things: (1) Jesus is dozing calmly because He is in control of the situation; or (2) Jesus is dozing calmly because He doesn't care if we all drown.

These men had just witnessed demonstrations of Jesus' control over everything from the fish in the sea to deadly diseases like paralysis and leprosy. But in the panic of the moment they opted to count the second option as true. They shouted to their Master through the howling wind, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" (Mark 4:38).

Jesus roused Himself and told the cataclysmic elements to quiet down, which they did with remarkable promptness. Then He cast an eye around at His shivering disciples and asked, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" (Mark 4:40).

The Twelve had not drawn the logical conclusion based on the facts they knew about Jesus.

Instead they reacted with understandable but irrational fear. (Did they really think this Man didn't care if they all went to the bottom?) Christ defined this reaction as the opposite of faith.

The faith that Jesus so earnestly hopes to nurture involves a point of view, a choice of what to focus on. Faith counts as true whatever facts we have access to. If you have access to only a few facts, that's okay, draw conclusions based on them.

The factor that makes the difference is this: exercising whatever faith you have, instead of not exercising the faith you don't have. It's the old glass of water question—is it half empty or half full? You can either look at what God hasn't done for you, or place your trust in what God has done for you and go from there.

Jesus' assurance is that even with a mustard seed of faith we can begin an unending and wonderful journey.

## WHY FAITH?

A visitor to Niels Bohr's country cottage was surprised to spot a horseshoe hanging on the wall. Wondering what use the brilliant physicist could have for such an archaic superstition, he asked, "Can it be that you, of all people, believe it will bring you luck?"

"Of course not," Bohr replied, "but I understand it brings you luck whether you believe or not."

Recently, as I thought about this scientist's tongue-in-cheek remark, I began to question why prayer shouldn't be like his horseshoe. Why shouldn't God answer whether we believe or not? I began to wonder why Jesus emphasized faith so much.

An insight came when I realized what it would be like to petition the Lord without believing. What's the opposite of praying in faith? It's possible to toss a request up to God without counting anything as true. You pray just in case; it's like knocking on wood; it can't hurt. When we pray like that, without any focus on God's ability or His truthfulness, our petitions tend to become mechanical — we pull a certain spiritual lever to see if anything will happen.

This kind of praying is unhealthy in the long run because it does not involve us on a deep level; we're not investing ourselves in any way. Having faith in someone is not that different from giving yourself to someone. To believe as we pray is to invest ourselves in the petition: "I count this fact about God as true. I affirm His faithfulness." We're not whistling in the dark, we're praying toward the light. We're not just knocking on wood, we're knocking on the door of our Father's house.

To believe sincerely is also to desire something earnestly. Sometimes we rattle off a petition out of habit or a sense of duty without really having our heart in the request. God wants us to pray with desire, to concentrate on the object of our petition. Non-faith is as unhealthy, in its own way, as frantic attempts to manufacture faith. Non-faith doesn't count the important facts as true; it doesn't have a healthy focus of attention.

The Apostle James echoes Christ's emphasis on faith as the key to answered prayer in his statement about "the prayer offered in faith" making the sick person well (James 5: 15) and in his instruction to believe and not doubt when we ask for wisdom. The latter remark may seem intimidating. Can we ever get to the point of not having any doubt about the requests we make to God? Must we believe so much that all uncertainty is somehow excluded?

James's point of view becomes clearer as he elaborates: "He who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does" (James 1:6-8). Here James is equating doubt with being double-minded and unstable as a wind-tossed wave. This strongly suggests someone whose commitment is wishy-washy. A person comes to God and asks for wisdom or whatever, then turns around and forgets all about it; his desires drift elsewhere. A double-minded person can ask for one thing while thinking of something else quite the opposite.

James's point is that God does not reward that kind of flippant request. He does not typically dispense gifts to those who barely glance His way before rushing off somewhere else. William Temple wrote, "If all our wants are supplied while we have no thought of God, this may confirm us in our detachment from Him."

Healthy faith, on the other hand, fixes its gaze on the Object of belief. Think of the faith required of us in prayer as simply looking in the right direction. If our gaze is constantly jumping from here to there, then our faith can be faulted. But if we're honestly looking, that's enough. Our need is to concentrate on the Object of faith, not on generating a greater quantity of faith.

Years ago, a Christian woman in Victorian London wrote of a trying time in which she faced a life-threatening illness. Only major surgery could save her, a type of surgery that often ended in death. After realizing the situation was a matter of life and death, she prayed her way to acceptance: "Never before, I think, was I enabled to put the whole thing so completely into the hands of our loving Lord."

Keeping this steady gaze, the woman requested two things from God: that she might not undergo the operation unless it was to be successful, and that she might not dishonor her Lord by fear. Afterward she wrote,

"And emphatically were both petitions answered. I had no fear whatever. I talked of it as coolly as of any ordinary occurrence, with the full consciousness that there was something close by very dark, at which if I looked, for five minutes, I should be in perfect terror; but if tempted so to do, there seemed a gentle whisper, that I was not to look at that, but at my loving Savior."

She was kept "calm and peaceful, up to the last moment; more even to my own astonishment... than to that of my friends, because I alone knew my own cowardice."

Faith, for this woman, meant focusing on her loving Lord — and not on the terrors of the operation. Far can constrict us terribly. Faith looks at something better.

Focusing your attention on God makes a difference — especially in times of trouble. If the problem is mesmerizing you and God has become a blob in the distance toward which you call, "If You can do anything," then your point of view needs to change. If you usually toss out requests without too much thought, or if your petitions are basically just in case, then a steadier gaze is in order.

To correct that faulty attention span, just look at whatever positive facts you have on hand about God. If you have a mustard seed of faith — enough to believe God exists—then draw conclusions. Faith doesn't mean trying harder. It means counting something as true; it means investing yourself in the petition.

## HE IS ABLE

As Jesus was walking along a Galilean road with His usual crowd of followers, two blind men joined the throng and began shouting, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" The men were calling out to Him as Messiah. When the party paused at a house for refreshment, the two managed to wedge their way close to Jesus and repeat their petition. He asked, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" "Yes, Lord," they replied.

So Jesus gave them their sight, uttering a characteristic phrase: "According to your faith will it be done to you" (Matthew 9:27-30).

This is one of the very few passages that reveals what the needy person is supposed to believe, as opposed to simply commanding faith. Of course the essential meaning of faith is to look at God Himself, to fix our gaze on Him. But here we see what, about God in particular, we are supposed to count as true. The blind men affirmed that Jesus was able to meet their needs.

On another occasion, a leper approached Jesus and said, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." The Master rewarded his faith immediately, cleansing him of his disease (Mark 1:40-42). The man reckoned as true what Jesus was capable of doing.

These incidents suggest something specific about how to pray in faith. It's best to phrase our request in terms of a positive statement about God. When you ask, express your confidence in His ability. This is different from begging, "Please, please, please," or from trying to generate a greater quantity of faith, "I believe, I believe, I believe." You concentrate on God's ability.

The value of this kind of focus came through to me during an interminable Illinois winter. One morning I had to hand in a paper in order to pass a literature course. I managed to coax my frail Volkswagen through several miles of icy country road before coming to a long hill. I couldn't get any momentum going. Several times I skidded about a third of the way up, my bare tires spinning. There was no way I could make it. I began repeating "Lord, only by Your power can I do it, only by Your power." It was somewhat like an incantation, I admit, but I wanted to exercise faith instead of my bad temper. Just then a man came running out of the only house in sight and pushed me all the way up the hill. Giving thanks, I steered on cheerfully and carefully until I ran into another long hill. I couldn't even get close to the top. Again I repeated, "Lord, only You can do it," trying to counter desperation with a clear focus. Just then my brother Dan came over the hill in his newer car (a vehicle that possessed good tires) on his way home from school. Dan's VW could make it back to school easily, and my car could make it down the slopes back to the house. We exchanged cars, turned around, and both arrived at our destinations. As I handed in my paper I couldn't help smiling about God's rather clever solutions.

Do you want to make your prayers more answerable? Make God bigger than your problems. Don't go on and on moaning about how terrible your situation is and begging God to help. Instead go on and on about how wonderful God is and express confidence in His ability to help. This is a healthy, logical perspective. When you ask believing, you will receive.

## FAITH POSSIBILITIES

Christ made outrageous promises about faith — laying them out bare and unqualified — in order to open us up to more possibilities. Much more is possible through the prayer of faith than we usually think. He wants to push us to experiment further, to attempt greater things. Jesus wanted to stretch His disciples, who were so slow to grasp the potential of the Kingdom. He was saying, in effect, "See more possibilities, draw more conclusions."

To exercise our faith and our imagination in prayer is to stand on tiptoe before the enormous sky of God's generosity.  
And our Lord, in turn, delights to stretch out of the blue and into our lives.