

Christianityworks
Having Faith that Moves Mountains
0057-3
An Unexpected Faith

Very few people on planet earth ever learn to be content with who they are and what they have. Very few people ever embrace the journey that God's called them on.

Well, What Did You Expect?

It's great to be back with you again this week – and if you had a chance to join me over the last couple of weeks, you'll know that we've been taking a look at faith – the sort of faith that moves mountains. And we've had a good look at a couple of real life stories – the story of Abraham and Sarah – man, they definitely needed faith and yet they made so many boo boos along the way. And then, the story of an incompetent king and these four lepers – that was last week on the program. And both of those stories – well they weren't what perhaps you may have expected.

Abraham and Sarah were so imperfect in their faith. And then the story of the siege and God's blessing – none of God's people showed any faith at all, and then these four lepers with really no other alternative stumble out into God's blessings. I wonder in a series called "Having Faith that Moves mountains" – what sort of stories did you expect? Stories about characters and people who'd shown this mighty faith? Stories of people, real people – who had such a mighty faith that they could single handedly cast a mountain into the sea?

And when you and I – when we look at our own lives and our own situations, what do we expect of ourselves? What sort of faith, what sort of journey do we expect?

I'll tell you what I expected when I gave my life to Jesus a decade and a half ago. I expected an easy ride. I expected that despite what the Bible said, despite what the preacher up the front said on Sunday mornings (and I was blessed with a really good teacher) and despite what happened to Jesus – I would have an easy ride of it.

That I'd crash through brick walls. That the problems would go away. That everything that I touched would turn to gold. And yet the more that I got myself into understanding God in His Word, and

the more I discovered fantastic promises like: *In the world you will face tribulation* (John 16:33).

I found those things and yet I still wanted to cling onto this notion that I would have an easy ride of it. That I was somehow special and different this tribulation thing was for the rest of you could go and travel your difficult roads, but not me.

The only direction for me was up. That's it. I'm not accepting anything else. And as I look back on those years since I gave my life over to Jesus as my Saviour *and* my Lord, there are some fantastic stories to tell. He's done such amazing things in me and around me. He's involved me in things that I could never have dreamed up for myself.

But there have been long and winding roads. There have been storms. There have been times when I felt completely alone. There were times when I would not have dared dream up a title for a bunch of radio programs like *Having Faith that Moves Mountains*.

And those times just didn't fit with my plan. Because my plan was so much like the world's plan. We talked about that a couple of weeks ago. Success. Success is about bigger, better, faster, richer. Success is about other people looking at our lives and saying "Oooh, he's truly blessed." And at some point it dawned on me – I can't remember exactly when – that my plan wasn't God's plan. (It's tragic, but it's true).

Even though I'd laid my life down at His feet as completely and as utterly as I was able, I still had a plan for "success." For a long time my plan and God's plan were tearing me apart. But the problem was I couldn't have described it as neatly as I just have to you now. I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was but something wasn't right.

I wanted to do great things for God – but it was on my terms and not His. I wanted to work hard and succeed at being a Christian. I wanted to make a difference in this world for Him. But there was something, something that had to give.

It's that something that I want to talk about in this week. To put it under a magnifying glass. To hold it up and look at it from this angle and from that. So that together we can identify it and name it.

What exactly are we missing – could it be that our template of success – yours and mine – isn't the same as God's. Could it be that

the pattern that you and I are carrying around in our heads and in our hearts – the glasses through which we see things – are kind of distorting our view – that we’re chasing after something that really isn’t there? Something that really doesn’t work?

One thing that I’ve discovered in life is that something that works well over here in this situation can be a complete failure over there in that situation. I worked as a consultant in the IT industry for many years. That took me into well over 200 organisations around the world. And it just never ceased to amaze me that whilst my experience and knowledge grew with each project and consulting assignment, it wasn’t possible to take the approach that we used for company X last year and use it for company Y this year.

Why? *Because the context and culture were invariably different.* Each organisation had its own unique blend of rules and relationships. This one was flexible and entrepreneurial. That one was more structured. This one was risk averse, that one was more open to risk taking.

This one had had a bad project two years ago that everyone remembered. Whilst this new one hadn’t. And so what I discovered after a few years of doing this, and with the benefit of a very wise mentor, is that the *template for success* was different in each organisation. In each circumstance. The most important thing to do was to figure out what success looked like for each client organisation, in order that we could shape a project and an outcome that was successful for them.

And after a while, I figured out that the *template for success* in the kingdom of this world, is different – I mean radically different – from the template of success in the Kingdom of God. And the tension that was going on inside me as I was striving so hard to succeed in this new Kingdom, God’s Kingdom was because I was striving for the wrong things. Things that in God’s eyes didn’t constitute success.

See, my context and the culture had changed. And I was still trying to be successful in the old way, the world’s way. In a way that was never going to be successful in God’s kingdom. As I said earlier, my model of success was based on the “onwards and upwards” idea. Always going forward. Never taking a step back. And to be honest, you see a lot of that brand of success is floating around the church of God today. It’s the world’s approach and not God’s.

It turns out that God’s template for success is based on something that I’d never, ever, ever in my wildest dreams thought would be

related to success. A word that I'd never used in the same sentence as "success". That word, is ... vulnerability. And that – that's what we're going to talk about after this short break.

The Substance of Things unseen

Now here's a scary though – if I say I love God, if I say that actually, actually Jesus isn't just the Son of God who saved me by dying on the cross – but He's also the LORD of my life – if that's what I hold out there as what I believe – well, what if I start hurling my faith at mountains that He doesn't want moved? What if I'm pulling in one direction – and He's pulling in the other. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out who's going to win that little tussle do you.

And that's the thing with faith – I see so many people exhausting themselves because – well, We want what We want and the Bible says I can have anything I want if I have enough faith – and so we kind of - well we abuse this whole faith thing – and I have to tell you from my own experience – it's utterly exhausting pulling against God.

Where as when I'm going with Him – there's a real holy ease about it. Doesn't mean that things are always easy, but what it means is that it flows. Even when there are challenges and obstacles and mountains – it just ... flows.

And to do that, we have to redefine what we mean by success. If we want to pull in the same direction as God – we need to figure out what success means for Him and go with that, don't we?? The most power packed chapter on faith in the Bible would have to be Hebrews Chapter 11, but the only two verses people ever seem to quote are these:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Hebrews 1:1) And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. (Hebrews 11:6)

And to be sure these are mighty Scripture verses. But my hunch is that the reason we like to pluck these two out of Chapter 11 all on their own is that they fit kind of nicely with the world's template of success. At least they don't contradict it.

But let's take a look at the rest of this chapter. It's about faith, but maybe not quite the sort that we really want to hear about.

It goes on to list a whole number of Old Testament Bible Characters: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Gideon, Samson, David, Samuel and the prophets. Great men of faith

... who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. (Hebrews 11:33,34)

Now that is certainly the sort of faith that you and I are looking for, isn't it? But look at what it says in the very next breath about these men:

Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect. (Hebrews 11:35-40)

Seems we would be quite happy to receive the first part of that equation – the accolades reserved for the heroes thus named. But which one of us – which win I ask, would be happy to be numbered amongst “the others”. Those other men and women of faith not named.

I mean which one of us kind of reads that passage and shouts – Hallelujah! No – we want to be on the Bible A List – like Abraham. We want to receive the mighty promises of God – and not in 20 years time, not next year – not even next week – we want it now – delivered like a hamburger through the shoot at the fast food outlet – don't we?

Yet even Abraham one of the named heroes here didn't receive all that was promised him. He never saw the great and mighty nation nor the promised land filled with his descendents.

These “others” were prepared for a template of success quite different to that which the world has dropped on our heads. A template based on complete vulnerability in the hands of God. Complete and glad surrender to His will, no matter where it may lead. Some, some tasted success. Some were called to conquer

kingdoms, administer justice, obtain promises, shut the mouths of lions, quench raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, win strength out of weakness, become mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. And "others", others were called to be tortured, suffer mocking and flogging. These were called to chains and imprisonment, to be stoned to death, to be sawn in two, to be killed by the sword; to go about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented.

Listen to me - even the biblical 'A-list' - Abraham, Moses, David, the Prophets, the Disciples, Paul the Apostle - were hounded, rejected, suffered hardship and yet, they achieved mighty things in faith that glorified not them but God. Do you see how different God's template of success is to our own?

And as I read Hebrews Chapter 11 and let God do His work in my heart by His Word and His Spirit, as I read of many of these men and women in the Bible who sacrificed their all for their God, I can only come to the conclusion that faith, faith is this: ***embracing the journey that God has set before us no matter what the cost, no matter what we may lose, so that He would be glorified in all the earth.***

Do me a favour - takes some time to read the Lord's prayer in the next day or so. Because as we explore that simple prayer, what we discover that Jesus is teaching us is that the key that unlocks the power of prayer is the glad submission of the prayer to the will of God.

Complete vulnerability in the hands of God, complete submission to His will, a desire to see His name lifted up above all things - that's what I discover the definition of faith to be as I read Hebrews Chapter 11. That's the sort of faith that moves mountains. In fact, it's the only sort of faith that moves mountains.

Embracing the Journey

Let's face it - we want life to be comfortable. Who doesn't? In fact, people go into debt to have more to be comfortable and then, when the economy takes a massive nose dive - as it inevitably does - they lose everything because of their debt, and their world is shattered. That's our instinct. It's who we are. Very few people on planet earth ever learn to be content with who they are and what they have. And here it is, very few people ever embrace the journey that God's got them on - with all it's ups and downs.

You know why I think that is, because deep down, we're still living our lives for us - thinking that's where we'll find satisfaction, rather

than for God – which is actually where true joy and true satisfaction are to be found.

At some point in our lives, we need to wake up to the fact that living a life of faith is about living a life for God and not for us.

And it's at that point that that sense that something's not quite right goes away. It's when we ditch the worldly template of success and embrace wholeheartedly, with every fibre of our being the template of success of the One who taught:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? (Mark 8:34-36)

I was listening to a man the other day, Tim, telling the story of the last decade or so of his life. In his early twenties he finally gave his life over to Jesus. With all his heart. And he set out on a journey of starting and growing a business with the intention of not only providing a living for himself and his business partners, but also for using the wealth and expertise of the business quite specifically and intentionally for the glory of God.

The business went from bad to worse. It didn't make sense. He had a house to sell, but it just wouldn't sell. It came to the point where they were relying on food parcels to get by. Tim spoke of having "dark nights of the soul" every night of the week. And in the middle of all that, as he was wondering what for the love of God was going on, he felt God say to him:

Tim – do you have the faith to live a life that doesn't matter?

The question came at the point when he couldn't take it anymore. He struggled with the question and he answer: Yes. It was the beginning of change. It was the point at which his business slowly started to turn around, little by little. And not long after, the call of God on both Tim and his business became clear.

Strangely, as he was sharing his story with me and a group of other men, he used that same word that had been going around in my mind in putting together this series of programs. Tim talked about *being forever vulnerable in God's hands* and adopting a *spirit of vulnerability*. Here's the bottom line – Tim embraced his journey.

So many people are struggling with the journey that they're on because they're applying the world's template of success rather than God's. And that's something that tears us apart on the inside.

Even if we can't quite put our finger on it. It's not until we understand that the journey is handmade for us, that we can let go and be vulnerable. Listen to how the Psalmist puts it:

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you. (Psalm 139:13-18)

Here's someone puts the two together. He realises that not only is he who God made Him to be but every step of his journey was planned even before any of them ever existed. Before time began. And in that knowledge, the Psalmist stands in complete awe of God. Who he is, fits perfectly with the journey God's got him on – even if it doesn't always seem that way. Listen to me – please listen ...

It is time to embrace the journey. The particular journey that God has us on. You, yours. And me, mine. Faith isn't about fighting that journey. It's not about wrestling with God and commanding mountains to fall in the ocean that God planned all along should be there for a time. No doubt there are things in our lives that the Master would change. But first and foremost, He would have us forever vulnerable in his hands. As the Apostle Paul puts it:

...a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. (2 Corinthians 12:7-9)

Paul discovered that no amount of faith will undo God's plans – however uncomfortable they might be. It is one such as this who is ready for a faith that can move mountains. Because it is one such as this who's heart is to move only the mountains that God wants moved. The faith that Jesus spoke of is not a faith that wrestles with God's often incomprehensible plans. It's one that cooperates fully with the plans and purposes of God, no matter what it may cost. And what a mighty life that will be.

Listen up: The world has dropped a template of success into our minds that's all about achieving things that the world values. Fame. Fortune. Recognition. But God's template of success is all about vulnerability. It's about a life laid down at His feet to do His bidding no matter what the cost.

Until we lay down the world's plan and take up His, we'll be torn inside. Faith isn't given to us to work against God's plans. It is given to achieve the plans of God. A life thus surrendered is ready for the sort of faith that moves mountains.