

IS COVID IMPACTING OUR FAITH?

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Scripture: Hebrews 12

When thinking about what to share with you – these past few months I have been having thoughts that had to do with what this pandemic has done to our faith and the potential it has, in some ways, to undermine different aspects of it. I've been trying to see how the Lord can help us through this time, and I landed on a passage in Hebrews 12:1-2

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith.

This is where we need to focus church. As we look at the things that we have gone through in these last 15 months maybe, and seen how we have got entangled in various places that have had the potential to diminish our faith, diminish our prayer life, or even look at the bible in a different way, or to think of God differently, how do we counter it? The writer of Hebrews says, "Keep your eyes looking unto Jesus. He is the One who perfects our faith."

So, keeping that in mind, let us look at three different areas that I think have in some way undermined this faith that we hold so dear and treasure so much.

WHAT CAN UNDERMINE OUR FAITH?

1. A Shallow Faith.

By this I mean that we lose the awe and reverence that we have for the Lord. somehow, over the months, we have lost the initial awe, the respect, the reverence for God that we used to have. In a sense, we've become armchair Christians; and truly, that's a real descriptor of possibly where we are. We are in armchairs every Sunday. The question for us is: Do we have the same awe and reverence that we had when we used to meet together on a Sunday? Do you still dress up for Sunday morning service? Do you still stand up and sing the songs, actually worship God? Are we still doing that?

Hebrews 12:28 says, *"Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe."*

I wonder whether we have lost the reverence and awe as we sit in our homes and worship God. Because we ought not to. We are still part of His unshakeable kingdom. Are we still grateful? Yes we are, for all the things that He has done. Are we still serving Him? We must. Are we still reverential towards Him? He is still God. Or have our Sunday encounters with the Living God meandered down a path of apathy and indifference? Has participation in worship turned into entertainment?

Those may be hard questions, but they are hard questions for me as well, because after taping the service, we too sit down and watch. So the questions I'm asking you, I ask myself as well. some of you are probably saying: "Well I made it, didn't I? I'm here watching the service even though it's been a rough week." To you I would say, "I'm so glad you're here. In fact, I'm sure the Lord is pleased that you are." But the point I'm pushing, and I want to do this gently – this new normal that we are witnessing, of meeting virtually like this, while being extremely convenient, can have a downside as

well. we can lose the “iron sharpens iron edge of corporate praise and worship,” “the gathering together of saints,” “the power of prayer.” So, we may settle into a more relaxed posture of worship.

We are still His children; He is still our Father, and He is still watching out and over each one of us. I think that’s why the prophet Habakkuk could say, *“Though the fig tree should not blossom and there be no fruit on the vines, though the yield of the olive should fail and the fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold and there be no cattle in the stalls; yet I will exult in the Lord. I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.”*

The prophet Jeremiah could look at the devastation all around, as some of us may be looking at the things that have happened in these past 15 months, and saying, “There has been nothing but devastation. Things that I held dear have been destroyed or taken away.” Jeremiah went through the same as he looked at the destruction of Jerusalem, saw people being taken away in chains, blinded, being led away into captivity – the ravages of Jerusalem. Then he says, *“This I recall to my mind; therefore, I have hope. The Lord’s loving kindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning. great is Your faithfulness. ‘The Lord is my portion,’ says my soul. Therefore I have hope in Him. The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him.”*

So beloved, I say to you: God is still God and deserves our full undivided attention and focus. He is holy in our midst. Let’s not lose the awe.

2. Dilution of His Word.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I heard many people use Psalm 91 as a kind of a shield against COVID. Then COVID struck and entered some of their homes. And the net result was a moving away from the Word, unable to stand on the promises of God, unsure of how to use and apply them, and thus ending up not using them at all. Not many things are more comforting than a promise made and kept, and not many things are more hurtful than a promise that is broken.

Yet, that’s not how God’s Word is, nor how God’s Word is to be used. It’s not a kind of magic wand. God’s word comes to us as a command, an instruction, as promises of who He is and what He will do for you, promises contingent on conditions, promises specific to context and specific people, and then promises made for all believers and followers. Unless we view them within their distinct settings, we are liable to be let down and feel disappointed.

I love this guideline by Ellen Hopkins that I think is very helpful. She says, “When deciding if a promise was made to you or the church, read the context and ask yourself:

- i) Is this actually a promise or is it a different type of statement, possibly the speaker hoping or wishing, praying for something rather than promising it?
- ii) Is this promise made to believers? Is it made to all believers or just once specific person?
- iii) Does this promise seem to pertain to a specific situation? Be careful to apply to a similar situation rather than accepting it as a general promise.
- iv) Are there any conditions connected to the promise? And we need to keep those in mind.

That’s the aspect of the word that we need to take care of, that we don’t take the word of God and brandish it like a magic wand to ward off sickness, adverse circumstances, or challenging situations. As a Christian, we are not guaranteed a life free from turmoil, hardship or illness. But yet, in all of this, God is sovereign. And if we trust Him, He will bring us through it. That’s what He asks of you and me, to trust Him implicitly.

Let us not cling to the false promise that God will not let us suffer in this life, or that if we have enough faith, we will not be afflicted. Because Jesus Himself said that we will have trials in this life. *“I have told you these things so that in Me, you may have peace. In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart. I have overcome the world.”* John 16:33

Job, the prophets Jeremiah, Isaiah, Haggai, Habakkuk, the apostles, Stephen – all had difficult days. And Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” is a constant reminder to us that some afflictions God allows to draw us closer to Him, to prevent pride as in the case of Paul, to witness to others as many who have succumbed to COVID have displayed in their final moments.

So I believe that God is inviting us to use His word diligently and with wisdom, allowing the Holy Spirit to guide you and me into all truth so that it will be a lamp unto your feet and a light for your path.

3. Powerless Prayer.

Somehow our prayer life could have been downgraded to one of powerless prayer. I’m sure that many of you have prayed for loved ones during this time – for a loved one, friend or colleague who was sick, and they were not healed and didn’t make it back to health again. Or prayed for a job to be retained either for yourself or a family member, but they lost it anyway. For extra money for something that you needed, for resolution in a conflict situation, for payments to come through, for a business plan to be approved. And the list could go on.

But the bottom line was that that particular prayer wasn’t answered in the way you wanted or were praying for. And that disillusioned you about prayer. Now maybe, you still pray but you don’t pray with fervor or with boldness. They are safe prayers, prayers that will always be answered because they are so generic and vague. (Lord, bless all my friends. Provide for all the needy Lord. heal all sick people, etc.)

And yet, beloved, I don’t think that is how we are told in scripture to come to our heavenly Father and to ask of Him things. Look at this sampling of verses.

Pray with Boldness.

Come boldly before His throne of grace (Hebrews 4:14)

We have boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way. Boldness is what ought to characterize prayer. It should be bold, certain and confident.

Pray in accordance with His will.

It must be in accordance with His will. *This is the confidence which we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, we know He hears us.* (1 John 5:14)

There’s a great and ringing note of certainty here. Prayer is not an experiment; prayer is a certainty with John, a sure thing. He knows it works and he knows how it works. That confidence is expressed by the word he chooses – boldness. Come with confidence, come with boldness. This is the boldness which we have in Him. We know that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.

Sometimes the moment we come to this verse; our instant reaction is: Oh my goodness! How do I know the will of God? How do I know His will that I can ask in accordance? Yet beloved, think about it. Just step away from that question and think about life as a disciple of Jesus. What is expected of you and me? Aren’t we committed as Christians to living according to the will of God? Isn’t that our plan, our blueprint for life, to live exactly in accordance with the will of God, to do His will? And the bible has revealed enough of God’s will for us to know what is and isn’t His will.

Then of course, there's the specific will that troubles us. Is this the person to marry? Will You please heal this sickness? And the list we looked at earlier then comes into play. Can I ask boldly about these things? The answer is a resounding YES. Why? Because God is our Father, your Father and mine, and we can come to Him with our own wills and desires as long as we end by saying, as Jesus did, "Nevertheless, not my will but Thine be done." He's your Father, beloved. He cares for you. He loves you. He doesn't want us to create all kinds of filters before we come to Him. He wants us to come to Him as we are, and to be able to ask Him freely. And yet, at the end of it, to be able to say, "Lord, this is what I want. And yet Lord, if this is not from You, then I'm okay with it. Nevertheless, not my will but Thine be done."

In that kind of asking, we will find strength even if the answer is no, because we have acquiesced to His will. But beloved, ask we must, and that too, boldly. Let me give you an example. When David had sinned with Bathsheba, God said that the child she bore would die. God made His will very clear to David. But David fasted and prayed, hoping that God would relent and allow the child to live. However, when the child died, his own men were scared to come and tell him, thinking that if he was in sackcloth and ashes, praying for the child while the child was alive, how would he react when he heard that the child was dead. But when David heard the news, he got up, bathed and then carried on with his life. he accepted what had happened; accepted God's will and carried on with life.

That is how we too must be, when something we have prayed for doesn't happen. We ought to continue, go on with life accepting that, even in this situation. Even though we may not understand. David did. To be able to accept that God's will is still being done and was done, and that He will still work out all things for our good, even as we continue to love Him. So we keep this relationship going, understanding that it didn't happen because God knew better. God's will was in play. That's the way our lives are being lived, being lived in perfect accordance with His will, as a child, as a son/daughter of the Most High God. We continue to love Him and accept those things that are according to His will and yet, maybe, not according to ours.

I don't know about you, beloved. Maybe you've gone down this path, and maybe today you're just indifferent to God, because you've asked and it didn't happen. Maybe God is calling your name today and saying, "You're still my child. I still love you. I still care for you. I still yearn to have conversations with you. I still want you to come boldly before My throne of grace. I'm still the one who can dispense mercy and grace. Come boldly! Come boldly!"

Church, I know that in the last 15 months, things have been difficult and quite a few of you are tired, worn out, fatigued from the pace you're keeping at work. Some of you are just weary trying to make things happen. Business has taken a hit and you're exhausted just trying to be creative and make things happen. Some of you are prayed out, burnt out, or no time for God. I believe that you're exactly in the place that I've been talking about, and that God is reaching out to you today.

These 3 areas, a shallow faith, losing the awe and reverence for God – maybe today you need to be reminded that God is still God, a holy God, one who has cared for you, sustained you, fed you, carried you through pain, grief, suffering – and is still doing so. Hasn't changed the fact that He gave us Jesus, that because of the embracing of Calvary, we will be with Him in eternity, see loved ones again and be rid of pain and ill health. He still deserves our reverence and awe.

Or maybe it's the dilution of His word. Maybe today, you just read His word, but don't apply it to your life. you're unsure of which promises to stand on. And life is not the same without the surety of God's word. There are many promises in the bible that are relevant for you. If that is where you are, listen to me. Here is what I'm offering. For the next 30 days, I'll send you a promise every day, a

promise from the Word of God that will encourage you and let you know that there are still promises in the word of God that you can stand on. All you need to do is send me an email or a text message saying, "I want that promise," and I'll make sure that for the next 30 days, you will get a promise from the word of God.

Or maybe it's about the powerlessness of prayer. I want to remind you below. God is still working, still answering prayers, still healing sicknesses. Recently, I got a message from one of our church members; let me read it to you. "Pastor, I just wanted to share my testimony. I was not well. During Easter, I received your word – Romans 8:11 – and I was healed. Thank you, Pastor. All glory to Jesus." God is still in the business of healing.

Maybe God is waiting for you to pray. Remember Elijah! "Go and I will send rain." God's will. God's timing. God's initiative. What does Elijah do? He goes up to the top of Mount Carmel and he prays for God's will to happen on earth. Maybe God is waiting for you to pray for a loved one. I believe that this is just an anointed sacred time between you and the Lord. I truly believe that God is waiting anxiously for us to respond – to be able to say, "Lord, I want to stand on Your promises. I want to be able to pray with boldness to You." And if any one of those areas resonated with you, and you're saying, "That's me! You're talking right to me. The Spirit of God is tapping me on my shoulder and asking me to respond to it." Beloved, will you do something? I want to pray for you in closing, but I invite you to stand wherever you are. I want to pray a prayer of blessing, of refreshing, of invigoration over you. Will you do that?

Heavenly Father, on each of these precious ones, Your children standing in their homes, I just pray that You would let the power and beauty of Your presence flow through them in refreshing, invigorating ways. O Father, take away tiredness and fatigue, remove disenchantment and disillusionment. Replace weakness and dullness with strength and faith, and pour out Your Holy Spirit upon them in a way that re-ignites passion and fervor and a hunger for Your word. Give wisdom on how they can use and rely upon Your word, Abba. Show them promises of who you are so that it will sustain them and help them to reconnect with you boldly, have conversations with You, that You will leave them nourished, encouraged and supported. And Lord, I pray that there would be a fresh peace that envelops them, an effervescent joy that overcomes them, and Your incredible self-sacrificing love that lifts them to higher ground today. It's in the name of Your Son, our Savior, that we ask these things. Amen.