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FAITH IS MEASURED BY USE NOT SIZE!

Today's Text: Matt. 21: 18- 22

Extracts:

And when the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, “How did the fig tree wither away so soon?” So Jesus answered and said to them, “Assuredly, I say to you, *if you have faith, and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ it will be done; and whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive*” [Matt. 21: 19-22]

Tropical storms are called different names, depending on the oceans in which they operate. They are called hurricanes in the north Atlantic and Pacific oceans, typhoons in the Asian Pacific or cyclones in the Indian Ocean.¹ However, all tropical storms share a common birth from a low pressure area with a fairly calm upper atmosphere that finds a relatively deep ocean. As winds near the ocean's surface spiral into the low pressure area of the disturbance, a momentum builds up that later translates into a storm. In 2005, the year regarded as the busiest Atlantic hurricane season on record, there were 28 such tropical storms but only 15 (54%) turned into hurricanes (i.e., wind speed of over 118 km/hour) of which 7 were severe (i.e., over 200 km/hr). The one we can never forget is Hurricane Katrina which almost wiped the city of New Orleans (USA) out of existence. In other words, we know or are interested in tropical storms only when they come ashore to destroy property and sometimes lives. Their severity is measured by their wind speed, not their size at the point of formation.

*Scripture has defined faith as “the **substance** of things hoped for, the **evidence** of things not seen” [Heb. 11: 1]. Therefore, to some extent, faith is like a tropical storm. Just as we cannot appreciate the size or strength of a hurricane until it lands ashore, we cannot measure the size or strength of your faith until we see it in action.*

So, what is your faith testimony? Are you a coward or a stalwart? Let us find out from this week's study.

¹ Story based on the following sources: ‘The power and fury of tropical storms,’ CBC News, Oct. 1, 2009, <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2009/08/10/f-tropical-storms.html> ; and ‘Hurricanes by the Numbers (Atlantic Hurricane Statistics), www.infoplease.com/spot/hurricane-census.html

1. Background: Is your faith tottering or tested?

Our story begins on the morning after Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The Lord had spent the night in Bethany near Jerusalem. As He was returning to the city that Monday morning, He was hungry [Matt. 21: 17-18]. He came to the fig tree by the road, hoping to find some ripe fruits. There was nothing but leaves. He cursed the plant, saying, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again." Immediately the fig tree withered away [Matt. 21: 18]. Mark's account of the same story says that the disciples knew of the tree having withered the following morning (Tuesday) and that it was Peter (of all the disciples) that drew the Lord's attention to it [Mk 11: 19-21]. However, the important point is that the disciples saw it and marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither away so soon?" In response, Jesus drew their attention to faith, saying, "Assuredly, I say to you, if *you have faith, and do not doubt*, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' it will be done, and *whatever things you ask, in prayer, believing, you will receive*" [Matt. 21: 20-22].

I can imagine the heads of the disciples spinning again. The last time Jesus said exactly the same thing to them, He had just returned from the Transfiguration experience (with Peter, James and John). The disciples were unable to heal an epileptic child brought to them by his father. When Jesus came, He rebuked the demon and the child became cured from that moment. In private, the disciples asked Him why they could not cast the demon out. He told them that it was because of their unbelief and added, "*If you have faith as a mustard seed*, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there, 'and it will move, and *nothing will be impossible for you*" [Matt. 17: 1, 14-20]. There was again another instance when Jesus was teaching about forgiveness where He said that if a person offended us seven times in one single day and each time came to ask for forgiveness, we had to forgive. The disciples said to Him, "*Increase our faith.*" He replied, "*If you have faith as a mustered seed*, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you" [Lk 17: 1-6].

We see from the forgoing that Jesus and His disciples were focusing on two different aspects of faith. *His disciples saw faith in terms of its size; the Lord saw it in terms of its use.* The distinction is clearer from the following examples. On one occasion, while Jesus was asleep in a boat that His disciples were rowing across the Sea of Galilee, there was a great windstorm and the waves beat into the boat that was almost filled with water. They woke Him up, saying, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?" He arose and stilled the wind which immediately ceased. Then, He turned to His disciples and said, "Why are you so *fearful*? How is it that you have *no faith*?" [Mk 4: 36-40]. On another occasion, a centurion (a Roman military officer) came to Jesus, pleading with Him on behalf of his paralyzed servant. When Jesus offered to go with him to his home, the centurion refused, saying that, as a man of authority himself, all that Jesus needed

to do was to say the word and that his servant would be healed. Jesus was astonished to hear that from a Gentile and He said, “I have not found such *great faith*, not even in Israel!” Then turning to the centurion, He said, “Go your way, and *as you have believed, so let it be done for you.*” His servant was healed from the same hour [**Matt. 8: 5-13**]. The disciples that had been with Jesus and seen so many of His miracles had “no faith” but the Gentile had “great faith.” Jesus saw action. His disciples saw size. That is why Scripture says, “Faith without works is dead” [**Jam. 2: 26**].

We are obsessed with size. We prefer taller to shorter, richer o poorer, faster to slower, and so on. Meanwhile, we have different kinds of mountains in front of us, physical, emotional or spiritual, crying to be removed. We had better pay attention to what our Lord has been saying to us for over two thousand years, namely, *faith is measured by its use, not its size!*

2. The growth path of faith

There is no believer that does not desire to be spiritually uplifted. Yet, when we read in the Bible about Meshach, Shadrach and Abed- Nego or Elijah or Paul, we paint them in super-human flourish. But did the word of God not say that “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours”? He prayed that it should not rain and it did not for three-and-a-half years. He prayed again “and the heaven gave rain and the earth produced its fruit” [**Jam. 5: 17-18**]. Yes, we can but we need to do something!

It takes time and practice for faith to grow. Its growth path can be traced through the following main stages:

a) *Learning to let go*

At this stage, you are battling with how to give up self-control and letting God take over, to mould you as the potter moulds clay [**Jer. 18: 6**]. It is not easy because modern civilization has taught us to be masters of our destinies. We love freedom and selfishness but faith requires us to let go and let God, to forgive and to love others. Some people do not want to try at all for fear of failing. But a learner cannot master a new art without first fumbling. For example, a child who has practised her lines well for a concert may suddenly develop stage fright when the curtains are drawn open! In due course, she may not even notice the audience.

If you find yourself frozen by fear into doing nothing or to merely complain and blame your circumstances on God or others, you are a spiritual coward. After all, “if you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small” [**Prov. 24: 10**]. Therefore, it is in your own spiritual interest to learn, make mistakes, practise and practise until you develop some confidence.

Take a cue from Moses when God appeared to him in the burning bush to reveal to him that he had been chosen to lead the children of Israel out of Egyptian bondage to a land flowing with milk and honey [Ex. 3: 1-8]. Who else was better equipped among the children of Israel than Moses who had been raised in the Pharaoh's palace as an Egyptian prince? Was he not a fugitive from Pharaoh's justice, having killed an Egyptian while defending a Hebrew from unjustified persecution? Yet, he was reluctant to accept God's call to do with His power what he had failed to achieve by human methods. To build Moses' confidence in God, the Lord asked him to throw the rod he had in his hand on the ground. When he did, it turned into a snake and "Moses fled from it" [Ex. 4: 3]! As Moses practised more, he overcame his fear and by the time he threw the same rod before Pharaoh and it became a snake, he was no longer afraid. Instead, his snake swallowed up Pharaoh's snakes [Ex. 7: 7-12]. The rookie had become a pro!

b) *Working with others*

Your tottering first steps have become steadier. However, you need to grow from sucking the milk of precepts and admonitions to eating the solid food of testimonies. However, you can no longer do it alone. You need help from others. When your faith is challenged, you will get help from whoever can protect or assist you, just as infants run to their mothers when they are scared outside.

Let us continue with the Moses example. God appointed his elder brother, Aaron, to be his mouthpiece before Pharaoh [Ex. 7: 1]. After the children of Israel had left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea, they encountered Amalek who came to do battle with them [Ex. 17: 8]. Moses deployed Joshua and his fighting men to face the enemy while Aaron and Hur joined him to go up to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hands, Israel prevailed but each time he let down his hands, Amalek prevailed. After a time, his hands became heavy. So, Aaron and Hur put a stone under each of the hands of Moses which they supported. Thus, Moses' hands became steady and Joshua and his forces defeated the Amalekites. Moses acknowledged the hand of God in their victory by building there an altar that he called *Jehovah-Nissi*, The-Lord-is-my-Banner [vv. 9-15].

You need others, especially the more mature and experienced in walking by faith to mentor you and guide your steps, to teach you how to cultivate and maintain a close relationship with God. You need assistants and companions because there is no way that you can do it alone. That was why Paul worked with Barnabas, Silas, Luke and Timothy, among others. Look at his gratitude list at the end of the book of Romans [Rom. 16].

c) *Managing success*

As you grow into the comfortable zone of walking by faith, characterised by dramatic testimonies of answered prayers, you could become a victim of your success. If you are not careful, you could succumb to other people's adulation of your greatness or become impatient and angry over other people's failures. A good example of the latter was when Moses, out of anger against the stiff-neckedness of the children of Israel, struck the rock, contrary to the Lord's command for him to speak to it. For that singular act of disobedience, Moses lost the privilege to enter the Promised Land [**Num. 20: 7-12**].

Paul and Barnabas give us a good example of how to deal with adulations from your congregation or outsiders. In Lystra, a Greek city, a man born a cripple heard Paul speak. Observing that the man had the faith to be healed, Paul said to him with a loud voice, "Stand up straight on your feet!" The man leaped up and walked. When the people saw that, they raised their voices, saying in their local language, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" They named Paul Hermes and Barnabas Zeus, both famous Greek gods. They brought oxen and garlands to the gates, intending to offer them as sacrifice to the visiting gods! But, as soon as Paul and Barnabas understood what was going on, they tore their clothes, ran among the multitude and cried out, "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and *preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them*" [**Acts 14: 8-15**]. You must decrease so that Christ can increase [**Jn 3: 30**].

d) *Remaining a good role model*

At this stage, you have totally conquered self. You can face ridicule or persecution but they can no longer stop you. You may be holding on to what does not make logical or common sense but as long as you are God-led, you will not be deterred. You are exhibiting the audacious faith of a stalwart. For the remaining days of your life on earth, your duty is to serve as a dependable role model for those behind you that are also trying to get it right with God. That was why Paul was able to say to the Philippians, "the things which you learned and received and heard and saw *in me, these do*, and the God of peace will be with you" [**Phil. 4: 9**].

Look at Peter when he and John were brought before the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem after they had healed a man lame from his mother's womb. The rulers' aim was to dissuade them from using the name of Jesus for healing and preaching. But Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of

Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole.” What an audacious testimony from a man who had denied Jesus thrice during His trial [Acts 4: 1-31]! Can you imagine how many young people’s faith was strengthened by what they saw and heard that day?

3. Conclusion: A toddler has to stand up in order to run!

You cannot know how much faith you have until you exercise it. You cannot pass a test that you have refused to take. So, begin right now as follows:

- . First, **establish a relationship with Christ**, the author and finisher of your faith [Heb. 12: 2].
- **Trust God**, just as you only go to a doctor you trust. Then, He will welcome and listen to you whenever you call Him [Heb. 11: 6].
- **Know His will** through His word [Josh. 1:8; Rom. 12: 2; 2 Tim. 3: 16-17] and through His messengers-dreamers, prophets and visioners around you [Joel 2: 28-29]. Have the mind of Christ so that you may know the mind of God [1 Cor. 2: 16].
- Finally, **get up and go!**

Be a stalwart in your faith walk and leave the rest to God!

Recommended Reading

Walking by Faith, *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 1 No. 6: 14 Oct. 2000;
http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_1/PDFs/Walkingbyfaith.pdf