

A Few Thoughts for the Hunkered-Down

Thursday, September 10, 2020

What Should Faith Feel Like?

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. —Hebrews 12:1-2

We are familiar with the teaching that Christianity is a *walk of faith*. Paul states plainly that *we walk by faith, not by sight* (2 Corinthians 5:7) and we have heard the standard definition of faith from the Hebrew Letter: *faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see* (Hebrews 11:1). To live and walk by faith means that we believe that the claims and acts of Jesus as presented to us in the Scriptures are true, and though we cannot see Jesus, we accept his life and witness as real, and live accordingly.

Faith is not too difficult to define, but the topic becomes more difficult as we ask ourselves, “And what does faith *feel* like?” That answer often begins with descriptions of joy, hope and glad assurance of life abundant. To come to faith in Jesus Christ is to realize that we are loved by God and that God is with us. It is the blessedness of knowing that we are a part of God’s family, the Church, and that we are not to walk this life alone. It is a feeling of hope, for we now have a wonderful destiny. There are many positive feelings to be associated with faith, but this answer is sadly incomplete and therefore potentially misleading! There are other feelings that accompany faith and we are sadly remiss in not carefully considering them.

In this season of the virus I have been asking people how they are doing in these days and the answers often go something like this. Folks tell how they are *adjusting* to the new order of living and with some sense of gratitude remark that they are *keeping afloat*. Then there comes a sigh and concluding remark: “*Things just aren’t the same. I will be so glad when this is over.*” The virus has brought a host of feeling into our lives and these have not been welcome guests. We grieve for those who have been lost to the virus and worry about loved ones who may be particularly vulnerable. We feel confusion as we don’t always know which report to believe about the bug. I recently remarked to one of you people that I feel continually stupid as I am never quite sure the exact precautions I should be taking in every situation, as many folks have differing convictions and even the experts disagree!

This is all causing a great uneasiness among God’s people, and at the heart of this uneasiness is a question: “Is faith supposed to feel like this?” Or to get to the nitty gritty of it all, is feeling continually stupid one of the legitimate feelings of faith? With

so many negative and unsettling feelings dogging us these days it is all too easy to start believing that we are failures at faith. This doesn't seem like the way faith should feel, and soon our faith finds itself under attack by the likes of guilt, shame and doubt. How are we to interpret these feelings? This brings us back to the central question: "What should faith feel like?"

A chapter later in the Book of Hebrews, after hearing of the great saints of the Faith, we are given a stirring illustration of our faith, and the emotions of that passage are rich and varied. Hebrews 12 begins by reminding us that our life is like a great foot race, and at a first glance we are stirred by the positive vibes of this picture. A great crowd of saints in the Church Triumphant cheer us on and we look ahead to Jesus who has run this race before us and won us the victory! This great exhortation to faith joyously stirs our hearts as it should, but take a closer look at the feelings which this little story presents. For starters, it is a foot race! That's hard! Even the experienced runner knows that such a contest involves some real pain. We are warned against the sins which cling to us and seek to drag us down, for a natural part of our faith is the doubts and ugly temptations that are always present. The verse points to the victorious Savior, but reminds us of the Cross and its shame which tormented Him. These are *all* the feelings of faith.

Faith is an ongoing battle and our feelings are constantly at war. Joy and hope are always being challenged by worry, anger, guilt and a host of other negatives. This is one reason that a healthy life of worship and fellowship with God's people is so important, for we need each other and the resources of faith to keep us built up and strong against the foe. And though we may be able to keep the negatives at bay, they are always there and the battle goes on.

Feelings are a bad barometer of faith. The walk of faith is ever challenging and full of feelings—many of them less than pleasant. Let us fight the ongoing battle of faith, and let us not allow the enemy to tear us down with guilt, shame and self-doubt. When we feel under assault with all the negatives, let us call out to Christ, and let us remember, this is what faith often feels like.

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

Lord, our heavenly Father, who orderest all things for our eternal good, mercifully enlighten our minds, and give us a firm and abiding trust in thy love and care. Silence our murmurings, quiet our fears, and dispel our doubts, that rising above our afflictions and our anxieties, we may rest on thee, the rock of everlasting strength. —New Church Book of Worship, 1876

Teach us, O God not to torture ourselves, not to make martyrs of ourselves through stifling reflections; but rather teach us to breathe deeply in faith, through Jesus, our Lord. —Soren Kierkegaard, 1813-55