

Message 4

FAITH IN ACTION – MARY AND MOSES

In this message, I would like to consider with you the outworking of faith, that is, faith in action. We will look at two examples in the Scriptures: one, a woman of faith and another, a man of faith. Their lives illustrate two key features of faith: belief in God's word and active response to God and His word. We will also consider different kinds of testing and outworking of faith.

Mary – a woman of faith

One day, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, who was then still a virgin, announcing to her that she would bear a son, who would be great and would be called the Son of the Most High. After the angel departed, Mary went to the hill country to visit Elizabeth her relative, who had also conceived even though she was past child-bearing age. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, this was what she said about Mary:

Luke 1:45

"And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord."

What is it that Mary believed? Mary believed what God had spoken to her would be fulfilled. She believed in the truth, in what God had said.

We may wonder why the Scriptures says: "Blessed is she who believed". Why "blessed"? Wasn't it easy for Mary to believe God since the message to her was so clear? We may think our problem is that we do not hear God speaking to us in such a clear and direct way. We imagine that if God were to speak to us in the same way He did to Mary, we would surely believe. We may then think that it would have been easy for Mary to believe what the Lord had said. But was it really that easy for Mary to believe? To truly believe or to have true faith requires a positive response to the truth we have come to recognise. And this can be very difficult.

Let us first look at the context of Luke 1 and compare the responses of two persons: Zacharias and Mary.

Zacharias' question

Luke 1:5-6

5 In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

6 They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.

Zacharias was a righteous man who walked blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. He feared the Lord and walked close to Him.

One day, the angel Gabriel told Zacharias that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son, who would be a forerunner of the Lord Jesus Christ, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. Zacharias asked: "How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years" (Luke 1:18).

Why did Zacharias say these words? Verse 20 tells us he did so because he doubted the words of the angel. He did not believe he and his wife could have a child. God therefore disciplined Zacharias, causing him to be mute for a time.

Luke 1:19-20

19 The angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.

20 "And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time."

Mary's question

Let us now look at how Mary responded when the angel told her that she would bear a child.

Luke 1:34

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

On the surface, it appears that Mary doubted the angel Gabriel the same way Zacharias did. But if we look closer at the text, we will see that there is a difference in their responses. Mary did believe. She was not doubting the words of the Lord through the angel Gabriel when she asked the question: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" Rather, she was asking, "How is it going to happen? How does this take place?" This was because in the normal course of events, a virgin is unable to give birth.

This is clear when we study the passage more closely. Consider the way the angel answered her: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (v. 35). The angel's answer explained how it was going to happen, suggesting that this was the meaning of Mary's question. On hearing the angel's answer, Mary submitted herself to God's will.

Luke 1:38

And Mary said, "Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

So Mary did not disbelieve the angel. She was merely asking how it was going to happen. Verse 45 confirms that Mary did believe.

Luke 1:45

"And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord."

Difficult for Mary to believe

I would like now to consider how difficult it must have been for Mary to believe and respond positively to the words of the Lord.

To begin with, Mary was a virgin. According to the angel Gabriel, she was to give birth while a virgin. This is something extremely difficult for any woman to accept. A virgin giving birth is against the natural order.

Consider further what was said about the Child whom Mary would give birth to.

Luke 1:32-33

32 "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David;
33 and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end."

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and God will give Him the throne of David, and His kingdom will have no end. What a promise! Any woman would have found it difficult to believe such words about her child. It would be especially so for Mary who was a simple, humble woman. There is no indication in the Scriptures that she was of any stature in society. And her husband-to-be, Joseph, was a carpenter. Yet Mary believed that the words spoken about her Child would be fulfilled.

The angel Gabriel told Mary that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and that the holy Child would be called *the Son of God* (v. 35). The Child she would conceive through the Holy Spirit would not be an ordinary human being sitting on the throne of David, but the Son of God. Again, this is something very difficult for anyone to believe. Yet Mary did believe.

Although such a miraculous conception had never happened before, nothing is impossible with God (v. 37). In verse 38, we see Mary submitting herself, saying: "Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word". Great must have been Mary's faith.

Implications on Mary's character

Many of us may think what a glorious privilege it must be to be the mother of the Son of God. But let us consider it from another angle. Mary had to suffer much travail, not just of childbirth, but also of the doubts that must have been cast on her character. Mary was an unmarried woman, yet she was bearing a child. How was Mary to face all the people who would be pointing an accusing finger at her? Who would believe that she was still a chaste woman? For someone who loved the Lord in all purity, this must have been terribly hard to bear. Just consider the embarrassment and misunderstanding she had to endure.

Even Joseph initially misunderstood her and “planned to send her away secretly” (Matt. 1:19) or, “to divorce her”, which is indicated in the margin of the NASB as an alternative translation. Joseph was able to accept it only after an angel of the Lord explained the whole matter to him in a dream (Matt. 1:20-21). If even Joseph had doubted her, how would other people believe Mary? How could they accept it? And it is likely the evil one would try to exploit the situation by stirring up others against her and casting doubts on her character so as to intensify and aggravate the whole situation. The evil one would want to make the situation as difficult as possible for Mary as it involved the birth of the Saviour of the world. However, what the evil one could do would be subject to God's sovereignty and what He allows.

Mary rejoices

Luke tells us that Mary not only believed, she also rejoiced (Luke 1:46-49). This passage reveals Mary's perspective and attitude.

Luke 1:46-49

46 And Mary said:

“My soul exalts the Lord,

47 And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.

48 “For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant;
For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed.

49 “For the Mighty One has done great things for me;
And holy is His name.

Mary did not look at things merely from the human point of view. She saw things also from the spiritual perspective and rejoiced and praised God for the privilege granted to her to be the mother of the Son of God. She looked beyond the immediate into the future saying: “For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed”.

At times, like Mary, we may have to go through situations we do not fully understand or situations that are difficult. This is where faith in God comes in. Trust in God enhances the quality and the beauty of our relationship with Him. We believe that He is who He has said He is. When we say, “Lord God, I worship You. You are the perfect God”, these ought not be empty words. If they are truly from our hearts, it would

mean we are prepared to trust Him through all kinds of situations. We would trust His wisdom, His love and His faithfulness to do what He has said.

Faith in what God has revealed

We build our faith on what God has truly revealed and spoken. But it is possible to be mistaken in thinking God has spoken when He has not. If that happens, our faith will be misplaced.

However, we know the Lord has revealed many things clearly to us. We have no doubt about them. We know God is great and good. We know He is the God of almighty power and steadfast love. We know God will always be true to His character and His promises. He has promised forgiveness and eternal life to those who truly repent and believe in Christ, and that if we abide in Christ and He in us, we will bear much fruit. We are also assured that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

We know all these are facts. We know God will be true to what He has revealed about Himself and His purposes. But many situations of life may not seem to correspond with what God has revealed about Himself. When we face difficult circumstances in life, we may find ourselves doubting the love and goodness of God, and our faith in Him may begin to waver. And Satan will cast many doubts in our mind: Is God really good? Does He really love us? Does He really care for us? Will He undertake in the situation? Is He able to?

In such circumstances, we have to continue living on the basis of what God has revealed. The Scriptures pronounces Mary blessed because she believed what had been spoken to her would be fulfilled. We too can be blessed when we believe that God will fulfil what He has said.

Moses – a man of faith

Moses is an outstanding man of faith. Let's reflect on a short passage in the epistle to the Hebrews and see what we can learn about faith from Moses and how he led the children of Israel out of Egypt.

Hebrews 11:24-29

24 By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter,

25 choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin,

26 considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward.

27 By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen.

28 By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that he who destroyed the firstborn would not touch them.

29 By faith they passed through the Red Sea as though they were passing through dry land; and the Egyptians, when they attempted it, were drowned.

Faith involves proper exercise of choice

We read in verses 24 and 25: "By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin". Moses was in a difficult situation. He had to make a choice, and he chose to be identified with God's people rather than to enjoy the pleasures of this world. We see then that faith is not passive. Rather, it is active and requires the constant choosing of the will of God. The proper exercise of our ability to choose is an important feature in the life of faith.

Faith focuses on the spiritual and eternal

As the son of Pharaoh's daughter, Moses could have enjoyed much prestige, power and "the passing pleasures of sin". But Moses rejected all these. Why? Because he considered "the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward" (v. 26). This verse clearly reveals Moses' perspective and attitude. He did not consider things merely on the basis of the visible and temporal. Instead, he viewed the whole situation from the spiritual perspective, from God's point of view. That is why he considered "the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt". At that time, Egypt was powerful and had many treasures. As the son of Pharaoh's daughter, he could have indulged himself in the pleasures of this world and lived a life of luxury. But Moses was "looking to the reward". What kind of a reward was he looking for? Not the earthly, material kind, for if it had been so, he would have remained as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He was looking for the spiritual reward.

The way Moses considered the reproach of Christ and the reward illustrates the point that true faith has an element of the future. True faith is not just grounded on the immediate and the temporary, but also on the eternal perspective. Our whole basis of life must include not just the realm of the visible and the temporary, but also the realm of the unseen and the eternal. In fact, the spiritual realm and eternal perspective must be primary in our consideration and approach.

Faith chooses the path of the Cross

We read in verse 25 that Moses chose to endure ill-treatment. He did not choose ill-treatment for its own sake. Rather, he chose this path of identification with the people of God as an expression of faith, even though he knew it would include ill-treatment. If we desire to live a life of faith, we too must be prepared to choose a course of action even if we know it would entail difficulties and pain.

When the Lord Jesus Christ says in Matthew 11:28: "Come to Me", He is not inviting us to a pleasant journey and an easy time, like having a picnic. Although there are

many assurances of God's comfort and care, the Lord is calling us to a life of discipleship, a life in which the principle of the Cross is constantly in operation. This is what He meant when He said: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:23).

When people suffer much pain, they may say, "Oh, the Cross has been heavy for me." What they say may not be accurate because the principle of the Cross does not refer to every kind of pain we may suffer. Even non-Christians suffer all kinds of pain, but that is not what the principle of the Cross really means.

In the scriptural context, the Cross is the pain and suffering that the believer experiences as a result of his following the Lord Jesus. It is the fellowship of Christ's suffering as exemplified by His death on the Cross. It is a path of pain and suffering because of the believer's obedience to the Lord.

The Lord has not called us to a life of ease, but one in which the principle of the Cross is a daily reality. It is a life of intense struggle in the spiritual realm. To be truly effective for God and to truly live out the life of faith, we will have to enter increasingly into the spiritual battle that is raging all the time. This spiritual battle will only cease when our days on earth are over and Satan is thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:10). Although Satan has been defeated by the Lord Jesus Christ at the Cross, he still prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour (1 Pet. 5:8). His power has not been nullified and he is still a formidable foe. It is only on the basis of the victory of the Cross that we can, moment by moment, overcome the attacks of the evil one.

Faith and endurance

Another important quality of healthy faith we see in Hebrews 11:25 is endurance. Moses chose to *endure* ill-treatment. This indicates the quality of steadfastness in the face of difficulties, and of personal sacrifices in the face of danger. We read in verse 27: "By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king". Moses was not fearful of facing the wrath of the king. He was willing to make personal sacrifices and go through dangers with an attitude of steadfastness and a faith that does not shrink back when the way becomes costly.

In Hebrews 10, the writer highlights the importance of endurance.

Hebrews 10:36-39

36 For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

37 For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay.

38 But My righteous one shall live by faith;
And if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him.

39 But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.

The life of faith can be very difficult. We will experience anguish, sorrow and tears. Verse 36 tells us that we need endurance to do the will of God and to receive what was promised. And verse 38 tells us: "If he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him". So we cannot shrink back when the going gets tough. We must constantly remind ourselves that we cannot live according to the visible and the material realm. If we live on that basis, the kind of life that God desires us to live does not make sense. We can carry on with endurance only because we recognise that total reality includes the realm of the unseen and the eternal. It is only when we have such a perspective that all the suffering, pain and agony in the life of faith make sense.

Faith yields positive outcome

Hebrews 11:28

By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that he who destroyed the firstborn would not touch them.

By faith, Moses kept the Passover. Why was keeping the Passover regarded as faith? It was faith because it was in response to God's instructions and promise. God had promised that if they were to keep the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, "he who destroyed the firstborn would not touch them". As they obeyed God's instructions, there was a positive outcome. Their firstborn were preserved. A genuine response to God in faith will always yield a positive outcome though the positive outcome is not always obvious.

Faith is active

Hebrews 11:29

By faith they passed through the Red Sea as though they were passing through dry land; and the Egyptians, when they attempted it, were drowned.

In this verse, we again see faith in action. The Israelites did not just say, "Lord, we have faith in You, we trust You." They acted according to their faith. The enemy was pursuing them and they were cornered. They were hemmed in between the pursuing enemy and the Red Sea. There was no way out. Death seemed certain. But God intervened. What seemed impossible became possible. The Israelites went forth in faith as instructed by God through Moses, and they "went through the midst of the sea on the dry land, and the waters were like a wall to them on their right hand and on their left" (Exod. 14:13-18, 21-22). God does intervene as He sees fit, even in seemingly impossible situations.

But look at the contrast. The Egyptians attempted to cross the Red Sea as the children of Israel did and all of them drowned. We must therefore not think that by merely following the external actions of others, we will obtain similar results. Faith is a moral response to God and what He requires of our lives. Just imitating the outward responses of others may not yield similar outcome. In fact, the outcome could be disastrous, as in the case of the Egyptians.

Examples of Mary and Moses illustrate key elements of true faith

The examples of Mary and Moses illustrate the two key elements of biblical faith that we considered in the first message: belief in the truth and the appropriate response to the truth, that is, living out the truth. True faith must be grounded in the truth, on what God says, and the life of true faith would mean trusting God and obeying Him, believing in His word and living it out.

Different kinds of testing and outworking of faith

I would now like to consider with you different kinds of testing and outworking of faith. Let us look at Hebrews 11:29-40.

Hebrews 11:29-40

29 By faith they passed through the Red Sea as though they were passing through dry land; and the Egyptians, when they attempted it, were drowned.

30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days.

31 By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace.

32 And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets,

33 who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions,

34 quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

35 Women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection;

36 and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment.

37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated

38 (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.

39 And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised,

40 because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect.

This is an account of people who faced different kinds of testing in life and who expressed their life of faith in different ways. They are men and women of faith who trusted the unchanging, faithful God in the most challenging of circumstances. Let us observe carefully what they had to go through and learn that living for God does

involve times like these. The Scriptures portrays them as having lived triumphant lives of faith so that we may be encouraged and learn from their example.

Obvious examples of faith

Sometimes triumphs in faith are more obvious; at other times, they are not so. Verses 29 to 34 show us those that are more obvious. The children of Israel passed through the Red Sea as though it was dry land. The wall of Jericho fell after being encircled for seven days. Rahab did not perish along with many others in Jericho because of her faith and her kindness to the spies. Other men of faith “conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight”.

Less obvious examples of faith

A life of faith may not always appear to us as triumphant. It may even be very puzzling. It may also at times appear to be a life of defeat: being tortured, mocked, scourged and imprisoned; being stoned, sawn in two, put to death; going about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated; wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. Such lives seem sad and pitiful. The devil seems to have triumphed instead. However, the Scriptures holds these forth as examples of triumphant faith. These are “men of whom the world was not worthy”.

Sometimes we do not fully understand the purposes of God and how He works them out, but we need not be unduly disturbed. Let us not remain as children in our understanding of these things. A life of faith is not one that is always pleasant and enjoyable. It includes times of deep sorrow, pain and anguish. During such times, the man of faith does not shrink back, but carries on with courage and perseverance. Let us consider the anguish of the Lord Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Matthew 26:36-39

36 Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.”

37 And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed.

38 Then He said to them, “My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me.”

39 And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.”

The Lord Jesus lived the perfect life of faith, yet also one of deep anguish and agony. Even in such a difficult situation, He was committed to doing the will of God. When we are thrust into situations of deep grief and distress, will we be able to pray like He did? We may ask: “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me”. But will we be

able to add “yet not as I will but as You will”, and mean it with all our hearts? Can we accept whatever our lot in life and continue to praise and worship God, knowing that His will is perfect, and that He is ever true to His character and word?

True quality of faith revealed in adversity

True quality of faith is revealed when a believer perseveres in the midst of trying times. When circumstances are very painful and difficult, when we are puzzled by what is happening, can we continue to affirm our trust in God, and with conviction sing “Faith is the Victory” and “Great is Thy faithfulness”?

The foundation of true faith must rest on knowledge, not on imaginations or falsehood. But the life of faith must on occasions go beyond what we can fully understand. The beauty of faith really shines through when we are able to go on from that foundation of knowledge and trust God even when we do not fully comprehend why the Lord should bring us through a certain path.

In the Book of Job, we read that God had allowed Satan to test Job severely. Job could not understand why he had to go through such severe testing when he had been living a holy and righteous life. Although he did waver at some points, he showed remarkable faith in God. The Book of Job teaches us the importance of unwavering faith in God in all circumstances, including very difficult and puzzling situations. There is purpose and meaning in what God allows His children to go through and we must learn to persevere by God's grace right to the very end¹.

The Lord Jesus – supreme example of faith

When we face difficult times and find life hard-going, it is helpful to meditate on the Cross. The Son of God, the righteous, perfect Man, died what appears to be a miserable and terrible death on the Cross. It seems a horrible defeat. It seems that His life of purity and righteousness had been lived in vain. From all appearances, Satan had triumphed. But in reality, this is not so, as Hebrews 2:14 tells us.

Hebrews 2:14

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil,

The Lord Jesus died that He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil. This was the purpose for which the Lord Jesus came into this world – to destroy the works of the devil. This is His great accomplishment on the Cross, and it opens the way of salvation and deliverance to all who would believe in Him.

¹ For a fuller discussion of these issues, please refer to my book *Understanding Job*, which is available on the website www.godandtruth.com.

Concluding remarks

In many situations we go through, we may not be able to understand God's purpose for us at that time. Even after a long time, we still may not understand. And there are some things we may never be able to understand while we are on this earth. But whatever happens, we must maintain our faith in the Lord. Beyond not blaming God, we must also be able to truly worship and praise Him come what may, knowing that He is still the sovereign Lord and that, if we are faithful to Him, His purposes will be worked out. We can be assured that there will be meaning and positive outcome in every expression that is consistent with a life of faith.

There is a hymn that has meant very much to me. The title of the hymn is "Faith of Our Fathers".

Faith of Our Fathers

Faith of our fathers, living still,
In spite of dungeon, fire and sword;
Oh how our hearts beat high with joy,
Whene'er we hear that glorious Word!

Faith of our fathers, holy faith,
We will be true to Thee till death.

Our fathers chained in prisons dark,
Were still in heart and conscience free;
How sweet would be their children's fate,
If they, like them, could die for Thee!

This hymn expresses the kind of faith that I have been talking about. It is faith in the Lord till the very end, come what may, including dying for our faith. Many who have lived such a life have gone before us. Let us follow their example of faith and be willing to lay down our lives for the Lord.

Let us consider what our faith means to us. Is our faith grounded on circumstances or is it grounded on God and what He has revealed? Let us count the cost and prepare our hearts so that whatever the trials that come our way, however puzzling the situations we go through, however painful the anguish that pierces our hearts, we will be able to continue to be faithful to the Lord. Let us be like the Lord Jesus, who for the joy set before Him, endured the Cross, despising the shame. He died for us so that we might be able to live for Him and follow in His steps faithfully.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Read Luke 1. Compare and contrast Mary's and Zechariah's response to the angel Gabriel. How is Mary a good example of a woman of faith?
2. Read Hebrews 11:24-29. What can we learn from Moses as a good example of a man of faith?
3. What are some less obvious examples of men of faith recorded in Hebrews 11? What lessons can we learn about faith from the record of their lives?
4. Reflect on your own life. Is it grounded on God and on what He has revealed in the Scriptures? Are you prepared to be committed to God, trust Him and be faithful to Him whatever the trials that may come your way?

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