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FAITH IN ACTION: MARY AND MOSES

In the previous two messages, we considered the meaning, importance and misconceptions of faith, what true faith is, and how faith begins, continues and ends with the Lord Jesus.

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. We will also consider the point that there are different kinds of testing and outworking of faith.

Mary – a woman of faith

Let us begin with Luke 1:45. Elizabeth was speaking 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.”

The opening words are: “And blessed is she who believed...” What is it that Mary believed? Mary believed that 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 direct way. We imagine that if God were to speak to us the same way He did to Mary, we will surely believe and act on it. 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 have true faith requires the appropriate 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 characters: 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).

The next two verses show us that Zacharias said these words because he did not believe what the angel had said. He did not think that it was possible for them to have a child because they were both advanced in years. God therefore spoke through Gabriel and disciplined Zacharias so that he would not be able to speak for a period of 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 distinction. Mary did believe. When she asked the question, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" she was in effect asking, "How is it going to happen? How does this take place?" as 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." The angel's answer explained how it was going to happen because that was Mary's question. On hearing the angel's answer, Mary submitted herself to God's will.

Luke 1:38

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

So in Mary's case, it was not that she disbelieved that it would happen. She was asking, "How is it going to happen?" Verse 45 is a confirmation 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 appropriately to the words of the Lord.

First of all, Mary was a virgin. According to the angel Gabriel, she was to give birth while a virgin. And this is something extremely difficult for anyone to accept. A virgin giving birth is against the natural order.

Furthermore, consider 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."

What a promise! Any woman would have found it difficult to believe these words about her child. It would be especially true 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. It would have been very difficult for Mary to believe that she would be the mother of One who would sit on the throne of David and whose kingdom would have no end. 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*. Through the Holy Spirit, the Child she conceived would not be an ordinary human being sitting on the throne of David. He would be the Son of God. Again, this is something very difficult for anyone to believe. Great must have been the faith of Mary. Although it was very difficult to believe all she had been told would be fulfilled, she did believe.

Verse 37 tells us, "For nothing will be impossible with God". Although it was something that had never happened before, yet nothing is impossible with God. And

in verse 38, we see Mary saying, "Behold, the bondslave of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word."

Implication on Mary's chastity

Many of us may think that it must be a glorious privilege to be the mother of the Son of God. But let us consider the other side of it. Mary had to suffer much travail, not just of the pain 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 and pure woman? For a woman like her who loved the Lord in all purity, it must have been something 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). The margin of the NASB says it can be translated as "to divorce her". 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). How then would other people believe Mary? How could they accept it? And it is likely the evil one would try his best to exploit the situation by casting doubts in Mary's mind, stir up others against her and intensify and aggravate the whole situation. The evil one would want to make the situation as difficult as possible for Mary as it involves the birth of the Saviour of the world. However, we know that what the evil one could do is subject to God's sovereignty and what He allows.

Mary rejoices

Mary not only believed, she rejoiced (Luke 1:46-49). This revealed Mary's attitude of heart.

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 bondslave;
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 beyond mere human thinking and the immediate surroundings. She saw things 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 may not fully understand or situations that may be difficult. This is where the element of trust in God comes in. Trust in God enhances the quality as well as the beauty of our relationship with God. 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 to be empty words. If they are truly from our hearts, it would mean that we are able to trust Him through all kinds of situations. We trust His wisdom, His love and His faithfulness to bring to pass what He has said.

Having faith in God's words

It is important to note that the foundation of faith is what God has truly revealed, what God has truly spoken. We can be mistaken in thinking God has spoken when He has not. If that happens, our faith will be misplaced.

However there are many things that we know the Lord has clearly revealed. We have no doubt about them. The Scriptures reveals to us clearly the attributes of God – His greatness, goodness, power and love. God will always be true to His character and to what He has promised. For example, He has given the promise of forgiveness and eternal life to those who truly repent and believe in Christ, the assurance that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose, the promise that if we abide in Christ and He in us, we will bear much fruit.

We know all these are facts and God will be true to what He has revealed about Himself and His purposes. But many situations of life may not seem to tie in with what God has revealed about Himself. When we face difficult circumstances in life, we may doubt the love and goodness of God, and our faith in Him may begin to waver. And Satan will continue to cast many doubts in our minds: 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. As the Scriptures pronounced of Mary that she is blessed because she believed that there would be a fulfilment of what had been spoken to her, we too can be blessed when we believe that God will fulfil what He has said.

Moses – a man of faith

I will go on now to consider another person of faith, the man Moses.

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 requires choice

First of all, we see that faith is not passive. Rather, it is active and requires constant choosing of the will of God. 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 with the world and riches of this world. The element of choice is important 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 things. Why? Verse 26 tells us: "considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward". Moses' perspective and attitude was clear. He wasn't considering things the way a natural man who does not know God would, just with his mind and viewing only the circumstances around him. Instead, he considered it 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 a lot of treasures. As the son of Pharaoh's daughter, he could have a lot of riches and live a life of luxury. But Moses was "looking to the reward". What kind of a reward was he looking for? Surely it was not the earthly, material kind, for if it had been so, he would have remained as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. What he was looking for was 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 the realm of the unseen and the eternal, not just the visible and the temporary. In fact, the spiritual realm and eternal perspective must be primary in our consideration and approach.

Faith chooses the path of the Cross

Verse 25 tells us that Moses chose to endure ill-treatment. It was not that he desired ill-treatment for its own sake. He knew he had to go through it as part of the expression of faith in his life and he was willing to choose the path of faith knowing it included ill-treatment. If we desire to live a life of faith, we too must be prepared to deliberately choose a certain course of action even though we know it would entail difficulties and pain. It can at times be extremely difficult to do that.

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 true discipleship, a life that is meant to be an expression and a constant experience of the principle of the Cross. 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).

The principle of the Cross as the Lord Jesus meant it in this verse is not merely any kind of pain. Even non-Christians suffer all kinds of pain, but that is not the principle of the Cross. When people suffer pain, they may say, "Oh, the cross has been heavy for me", but that is not what the principle of the Cross really means.

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

The Lord has not called us to an easy life, but a life where the experience of the principle of the Cross is meant to be a daily experience. It is a life of intense struggle in the spiritual realm. If we want to be truly effective for God and to truly live out the life of faith, we will have to increasingly enter into the intensity of the spiritual battle that is raging all the time. It would 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, the Scriptures tells us 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 requires 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, of faithfulness in the face of difficulties, 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 the preceding chapter, the writer to the Hebrews has already dwelt on the quality 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.

Verse 36 tells us that we need endurance to do the will of God and to receive what was promised. A life of faith can be very difficult. There may be great sorrow and tears. But 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 on the basis of 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 anguish in the life of faith make sense.

Faith yields positive results

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 responded to God's instructions, there was a positive outcome. Their firstborn were preserved. A genuine response to God in faith will always yield a positive result. The positive result may or may not be obvious, but there will always be a positive result when we act in faith, in obedience to the Lord.

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, I have faith in You, I trust You", but they acted according to their faith. The enemy was pursuing them and they were cornered. There was no way out. Death seemed certain. They were hemmed in between the pursuing enemy and the Red Sea. But what seemed impossible was accomplished because God intervened. And the Israelites went forth and walked on dry land. 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. There is no guarantee that this will be the case. Faith is a moral response to God and what He requires of our lives. Just imitating the outward responses of others may not yield the same results. It may even be disastrous as was the experience of the Egyptians.

Different kinds of testing and outworking of faith

I would now like to consider with you different kinds of testing and outworking of faith. I will start with 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 passage gives 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 midst of the most challenging of circumstances.

Let us observe carefully what they had to go through and learn that the reality of 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.

More 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 Egyptians attempted the same and were drowned. 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 triumphant life of faith can sometimes appear very puzzling; it can 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. These hardly seem to be examples of a triumphant life of faith. Such lives seem sad and pitiful, and 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 let us not remain as children in our understanding of these things. A life of faith is not necessarily one where it is always pleasant and enjoyable. A life of faith can include 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. The supreme example of such a life is that of the Lord Jesus. Surely, He lived the perfect life of faith, yet also one that underwent much deep anguish and agony. Let us look at Matthew 26, which records the anguish of the Lord Jesus.

Matthew 26:36-38

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."

A life of faith can include times of deep grief and distress. In the midst of sorrow and tears, we have to continue to be faithful. When thrust into such a situation, can we, like the Lord Jesus, pray, "Father, not my will but Yours be done"? Although at times we may ask, "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me", are we able to add to it, "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 Him, knowing that God's 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 even as a building rises above the foundation, the life of faith must on occasions go beyond what we can fully understand on the basis of knowledge. The beauty of faith that really shines through is when we are able to go on from that foundation of knowledge and trust God and abide by His word even when we do not fully comprehend why certain things should happen and why the Lord brings us through a certain path.

In the Book of Job, we read that God had allowed Satan to test Job severely. Job couldn't understand why he had to go through such severe times of 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 was written to teach us that although we may not understand what we are going through, there is purpose and meaning behind the things that go on, and we can persevere with full confidence in God right up to the very end. (For a fuller discussion of these issues, please refer to my book *Understanding Job* which is posted on this website.)

The Lord Jesus – supreme example of faith

When we face times like this, when it is very difficult to endure and to go on in life, it is helpful for us to meditate on the death of the Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross. The Son of God, the righteous, perfect Man died what appears to be a miserable death on the Cross. It seems a terrible defeat; it seems that His life of purity and righteousness had been lived in vain. As far as the physical eyes can see, Satan had triumphed. But in reality it is the greatest triumph of faith over the works of the devil.

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,

This verse tells us that 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 appeared in this world – to destroy the works of the devil. This is His great accomplishment on the Cross and it opens the way of salvation to all those who would believe in Him.

In many situations that we go through, we may not be able to understand God's purpose for us at that time. Sometimes, after a long period of time has passed, we still do not understand. And there are some things we may never be able to understand while we are in the flesh on this earth. But whatever happens, we must maintain the attitude of faith in the Lord. It is not just that we do not blame Him for what happens, but we must 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 result in every act and expression that is consistent with a life of faith.

There is a hymn that has meant very much to me. It is called "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 death. Many are those who have gone before us who have lived such a life. Let us follow their example of faith and be willing to lay down our lives for the Lord.

Concluding remarks

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 may come, however puzzling the situations, 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 that we might be able to live for Him and faithfully follow in His steps.

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