

Message no: G16
Series: The Life of Faith
Date preached: 8 Jun 80
Date edited: 08 Aug 07 (revised 07 Dec 09)

THE LIFE OF FAITH – A CHRIST-CENTRED LIFE

In this message, I wish to consider with you the theological basis and framework for the life of faith. Understanding the life of faith must begin with the recognition of the dilemma of man – his frailty and his sinful state – which renders him incapable of having a meaningful relationship with the almighty and holy God. We will see how God resolves man’s dilemma through the Lord Jesus Christ.

God has an eternal purpose, and it is summed up in a key expression in the Scriptures: the mystery. The term “mystery” used here does not have the same meaning as that often used in novels, where “mystery” refers to something mysterious. In the New Testament, especially in the epistles of Paul, “mystery” often refers to the revelation of what is in the heart of God – His plan hidden in ages past, but now revealed to us through the Holy Spirit¹. At the heart of the mystery is the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. God the Son became the God-man, and through His death on the Cross, enables us to become partakers of the divine nature so that we can relate meaningfully with God and work out His purposes together with Him – on earth and in eternity. This is the gospel – the good news of the richness of life made possible in Christ Jesus.

In John 14:6, the Lord Jesus says: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life”. Since Christ is the truth and faith must be based on the truth, our life of faith must be vitally linked to Christ. Since Christ is also the way – the way to God and the way to live our life – our whole life must be characterised by a close walk with the Lord Jesus. And since Christ is the life, we must abide in Him so that we may be spiritually strengthened and nourished by the life of God and be able to live an abundant life. The Lord Jesus is the way, and the truth, and the life. The beginning, continuation and consummation of our life of faith must thus centre on Christ Jesus.

The life of faith begins with Christ

After commending the heroes of faith in chapter 11, the writer to the Hebrews exhorts us to look to Jesus, the *author* and perfecter of faith. We may ask: Why is the Lord Jesus the author of our faith, and how do we begin our life of faith in Him?

To answer these questions, we need to understand the dilemma of man without God. The apostle Paul makes this clear to us in Ephesians 2:1-3.

¹ For a fuller consideration of this subject, please refer to my messages P002-009 in the series *The Fulfilment of God’s Purposes*, which are available on the website www.godandtruth.com.

Ephesians 2:1-3

- 1 And you were dead in your trespasses and sins,
- 2 in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.
- 3 Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

Before knowing God, we were dead in our trespasses and sins. We were living in darkness and walking according to the ways of the evil one, according to the pull of this world and the desires of our flesh. We were disqualified from having fellowship with God, who is light and in whom is no darkness at all. There was a barrier between us and God because of our sins. We were under God's wrath and judgement. We were "dead", not having the life of God in us.

To be reconciled to God, our sins have to be dealt with. This we are unable to do on our own. The Scriptures tells us: "by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight" (Rom. 3:20). We are unable, by our own effort, to live a righteous life no matter how hard we try. We are also unable to eradicate our past sins or cancel the punishment due to us. We are powerless to save ourselves; and other human beings are just as powerless, for all have sinned.

There is no way for us to be reconciled to God except through the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ came into this world to deal with our sins. He came to die for us and to bear the punishment that is due to us. He could die on our behalf because He is the sinless Son of God. And because He is divine and not merely a man, He was able to bear the weight of the sins of the whole world and the punishment due to all mankind. His death on the Cross is infinitely valuable and efficacious. Through His atoning work at the Cross, we can now be forgiven, cleansed of all our sins and made right with God.

But how can we benefit from the work of Christ? What kind of faith must we have to be converted and enter into salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ? What are the essential elements of "saving faith"?

Saving faith

Saving faith requires that we first *recognise the truth*, which in this case is the recognition of who Jesus Christ is and what He has done for us.

1 John 5:1

Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God...

This verse highlights that Jesus is the Christ – the Messiah, the Deliverer, God's appointed Saviour – and that to be born again or born of God, we must believe that Jesus is the Christ.

During His earthly ministry, the Lord Jesus preached this message: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). To enter the kingdom of God, we need to repent and believe in the gospel. But what is the gospel we must believe in? In 1 Corinthians 15:1-4, Paul explains the essence of the gospel.

1 Corinthians 15:1-4

1 Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand,

2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.

3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

4 and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,

The heart of the gospel is that Christ died for *our* sins, was buried, and was raised on the third day. To be saved, we must acknowledge that we are sinful and guilty before God, and that Christ has died for our sins and has dealt with the problem of sin in our life. We must believe that Christ was raised from the dead. His resurrection testifies to His deity and His triumph over the powers of darkness (Col. 2:15), and that He is indeed a living Saviour. It is also the stamp of God's approval on what Christ has accomplished at the Cross.

We see then that the first aspect of saving faith concerns recognition of the truth, the truth of who Christ is and what He has done for us on the Cross.

The second aspect of saving faith is the *proper response* to the truth. Mere recognition of the truth and mental assent to the gospel is insufficient. The demons also recognise who the Lord Jesus Christ is but they shudder. Their recognition does not help them. Saving faith requires that we repent of our sins and receive Christ into our lives as our Saviour and Lord. It is only then that we can become children of God.

John 1:12

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name,

There is no true salvation unless there is a proper response to the gospel. The Lord Jesus helps us to understand the way of true salvation when He says: "Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46) and "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter" (Matt. 7:21). It is not enough for us to merely acknowledge that Jesus is Lord. We must have a determined desire to walk with God and to do His will by His gracious enabling.

Believing in the gospel is a moral issue. In response to the Holy Spirit at work in our hearts, we turn from a life of darkness and sin to a life of submission to the lordship of Christ, to a life of walking in His light and truth.

Having this understanding can make a significant difference to the way we present the gospel to others. All too often, in our eagerness to bring people to the Lord, we emphasise the attractiveness of the gospel and downplay or neglect the issue of discipleship. We may give the impression that all that is needful is for a person to receive Christ as his Saviour, whereas submitting to His lordship is optional. The outcome is that Christians end up not having a clear understanding of the importance of wholehearted commitment to the Lord. It would be worse if those who have not repented think they have become Christians. Such people are not regenerated and have not entered into new life in Christ. Without true repentance, there is no saving faith.

It is important that we emphasise Christ as both Saviour and Lord. Submission to the lordship of Christ should take place at conversion. The Lord Jesus says: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). These are the demands of discipleship. They commence at the time when we receive the Lord Jesus Christ into our lives, not at some point later.

Salvation involves a fundamental change of heart and direction in life. It does not mean that we become perfect or that we will no longer sin, but it does mean a determined intention in our heart and will to be committed to God. It involves turning away from living according to the ways of the world and according to our own desires, to living a life for God. This is the attitude of heart we must continue in as we work out our salvation. We must not return to wallowing in the mire, as the apostle Peter warns us in 2 Peter 2:22.

The life of faith continues with Christ

Not only does the life of faith begin with Christ, it also continues with Christ.

The overcoming life

Having had our past sins dealt with, we now have to live a life in accordance with the truth. This we cannot do on our own. God has not created us with the capacity to live righteously apart from Him. Our inability to live righteously on our own is aggravated by the weakness of the flesh. We are fallen creatures living in a fallen world and in the presence of a powerful enemy. If we try to live out the truth on our own, we will fail. Our life will be miserable, like what Paul describes in Romans 7.

Romans 7:14-19

14 For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.

15 For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.

16 But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good.

17 So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.

19 For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.

In this passage, Paul tells us that even when we recognise the truth and strive to live accordingly, we often fail. We fail to do what we recognise we ought to, and we keep doing what we recognise as evil and harmful.

Romans 7:22-24

22 For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man,

23 but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.

24 Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?

This will be our state if we do not know deliverance in the Lord Jesus Christ. We will find ourselves crying out: "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" We need to be set free, but who will set us free? The answer lies in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 7:25

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! ...

The Scriptures speaks much about the richness of life in Christ. The Lord Jesus tells us in John 10:10 that He "came that they may have life, and have it abundantly". But how can we enter into such a life?

Paul says: "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13). He also says: "But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us" (Rom. 8:37). What a marked contrast to the life of failure he describes in Romans 7! Paul has found the answer to the victorious life. With the Lord Jesus strengthening us, we too can arrive at the stage where we can say, "I can do all things and overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loves me."

Christ died to set us free not only from the penalty of sin, but also from bondage to sin. He not only reconciles us to God, He also strengthens us and enables us to do all things in accordance with the truth. Through Him, we can overcome the power of the evil one and the temptations of the world. In Him, we have the power to live a holy, righteous and good life. Apart from Christ, we cannot bear good fruit (John 15:5).

Growing in richness of life in Christ

It is vital not only to begin well but also to continue well in the life of faith. Paul knew very well what this meant. He testified to the believers in Philippi: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21). His life was bound up with the Lord Jesus Christ and completely centred on Him. He sought to know the Lord Jesus in increasing measure. He set his heart to exalt the Lord Jesus at all times and to live by the power of the risen Christ, that the life of Christ might be manifested through his life.

In his epistle to the Colossians, Paul dwells on truths that have tremendous implications and significance for our lives. In 1:25-2:10, he tells us that at the very heart of God's plan is the glorious mystery now revealed. It indicates the way God's intention for man can be realised, which is "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (1:27); it is Christ coming into our lives and being with us. All the wealth that comes from a true knowledge of God's mystery is attainable in Christ, and in Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:2-3). And in 2:9-10, Paul writes: "In Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete".

God does not merely forgive us and cleanse us of our sins. He is seeking to raise us up to such a level of moral and spiritual stature that He, the infinite, almighty and perfect God, can relate intimately with us as friends.

Although we are finite and frail creatures, we now have the Lord Jesus Christ dwelling in us. This is a spiritual reality. Because of this spiritual reality, we can be transformed and be partakers of the divine nature. We can become children of God in a very deep sense. Deep communion with God is no longer just a vain hope, but an attainable goal.

In Colossians 2:6-7, we see the importance of continuing the life of faith in Christ.

Colossians 2:6-7

6 Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him,
7 having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established
in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude.

Our spiritual growth is inseparably linked to our relationship with Christ. Our faith must be established, rooted and built up in Him. Our constant longing must be to know Him more and more, and to grow to be more and more like Him in character. It is to this end that Paul expended his energy – that every believer may be complete or mature in Christ.

Colossians 1:28-2:2

28 We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man
with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.

29 For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.

1 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf...
 2 that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself,

Paul laboured and strived to help believers attain maturity in Christ. He desired to see them attain to the full richness of life that goes together with a deep knowledge of Christ. This longing was so strong that he described it as a "struggle" (2:1). This "struggle" could be his earnest longing expressed in striving and persevering in prayer for the believers and their growth in Christ.

A fruitful and abundant life

The Lord Jesus Christ teaches His disciples: "Abide in Me, and I in you" (John 15:4). He also teaches them: "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). A fruitful life is possible only as we depend on Him so that His life may be manifested in and through our lives.

Some people think it is inevitable that the Christian life has its ups and downs. It is true that feelings and life's circumstances may fluctuate, but scriptural teaching does not suggest the quality and meaning of our walk with God must inevitably fluctuate between faring well and faring poorly. It can be stable, firmly rooted in Christ, and continually being built up in Him. Such a life is expressed in Romans 8:2.

Romans 8:2

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

In this verse, Paul tells us that we can live an overcoming life in Christ and in dependence on Him. In Him, we can live a life of freedom in the Holy Spirit and our life need not fluctuate or alternate between defeat and victory. In Christ, we can experience freedom from the law of sin and of death. Such a life of continual victory in the Lord Jesus Christ can be our constant experience.

Running the race

The Book of Hebrews has much to teach us concerning the life of faith. Hebrews 12:1-2, in particular, shows us how to run the race, which is the life of faith.

Hebrews 12:1-2

1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

The writer to the Hebrews exhorts us to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith. Not on the Jesus walking on earth, not on the Jesus lying in the tomb, but on the Lord Jesus exalted and seated at the right hand of the throne of God. As we run the race, we set our eyes on the exalted Christ, in all His triumph and power and glory. We are also to be mindful that we are seated with Him in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6). Thus, we run the race and live out our life of faith "in Christ", from the position of Christ's victory, power and glory.

Many of us tend to focus on the visible things around us and view things from the world's perspective. As a result, we are easily discouraged and find life difficult and hopeless. However, if we view life through the eyes of faith and from the perspective of God's kingdom, we can live fruitful and overcoming lives at all times. We need not feel discouraged in any situation if we maintain our spiritual vision, constantly fixing our eyes on the Lord Jesus.

If we live in faithfulness to God, our lives will never be fruitless or a failure, although circumstances may suggest otherwise. Consider the death of the Lord Jesus. It may appear to be a devastating defeat. He who was to be the Saviour of the world died on the Cross while His disciples fled. It all seemed so dark and hopeless, but in reality, it is the greatest triumph in history and the supreme example of faith and obedience to God. It has far-reaching implications for the fulfilment of God's purposes, and it laid the foundation for the advancement of God's kingdom. Likewise, if we live faithfully in the Lord, in accordance with God's guidance and enabling, and in accordance with His instructions as revealed in the Scriptures, our labour will never be in vain. But if we live according to our own thinking, strength and desires, we will not be abiding in Christ, and our labour will be in vain even if it appears successful.

Bringing to completion our life of faith in Christ

We have seen the writer to the Hebrews exhorting us to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and *perfecter* of faith. This means we must look to the Lord to live our life of faith from beginning to end. He is seeking to bring to completion the work He has begun in our hearts (Phil. 1:6). We must cooperate with Him and grow as much as we can in moral and spiritual stature and in conforming to the image of Christ during our time on earth. We will then be ready for the Second Coming of Christ.

The Lord Jesus promises us that He will come again (John 14:3). When He appears, we will be like Him (1 John 3:2). He will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory (Phil. 3:21). The meaning of our eternal life and all that is important in eternity is bound up with our knowledge of and relationship with God the Father and Christ the Son (John 17:3).

“Christ in you, the hope of glory” is not just for our life on earth, but also for eternity, when Christ will be the firstborn among many brethren (Rom. 8:29). Why does He call us His brethren (Heb. 2:11)? Because Christ is now in us and we are in Him. Having been made partakers of the divine nature, we are no longer weak and frail creatures, but people with tremendous potential. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit. God is transforming our character and our very being, and He wants us to grow in moral, spiritual beauty and stature so that we may be increasingly conformed to the image of Christ. God has seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ “so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:7). While we do not fully comprehend what all this will mean, we do know that there is very much that we can look forward to.

Ephesians 1:9-10 presents another aspect of the mystery.

Ephesians 1:9-10

9 He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him

10 with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth...

These verses tell us that the mystery, the grand revelation of God, has to do with the summing up of all things in Christ. In eternity, it is only those who are in Christ who will have a meaningful part in the continual outworking of God's purposes. All who belong to God will be in Christ as members of His body.

Life of faith in Christ in the context of His body

As we consider the life of faith, how it begins with Christ, continues with Him and looks forward to the glorious future in Him and together with Him, it is important that we view all this in the context of the church, the body of Christ.

Salvation begins with a personal response of repentance and faith in God through the Lord Jesus Christ. But our life of faith in Christ is not meant to be individualistic. The moment we are born of the Spirit and become children of God, we are baptised into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). This means we are not merely spiritually joined to the Lord Jesus Christ, but also to one another in the body of Christ. We must be mindful that we do not live as individuals, but as members of His body. We need to abide by the principles that govern the outworking of body-life – unity, interdependence, cooperation, and submission to Christ as the ultimate authority, who supervises, guides and enables. These are revealed to us in many passages of the Scriptures, such as Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12-14 and Ephesians 4.

In Ephesians 1:22-23, Paul shares with us the perspective of our life in the context of the body.

Ephesians 1:22-23

22 And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church,

23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

The church is the body of Christ. God has given Christ as head over all things to the church. As Christ's body, the church is meant to manifest the fullness of Christ. An individual can never manifest the fullness of Christ the way the church can. If the church is functioning properly, it can express the fullness and the beauty of Christ – His love, wisdom, power and glory. There is tremendous potential in the outworking of church life when body-life is functioning well and individual believers and the whole body are submitted to the lordship of Christ.

Ephesians 3:8-11

8 To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ,

9 and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things;

10 so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.

11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,

Here, Paul tells us it is God's intention that the manifold wisdom of God be made known through the church, not only to men, but also to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. Although we will not be able to fully grasp the implications of this, what is clear is that church life worked out in the way God intends will have a tremendous impact on earth as well as in the heavenly places. Paul goes on to say that this has been God's eternal purpose, which is being fulfilled through the church in Christ Jesus.

Concluding remarks

As we seek to live out our life of faith, it is important that we are clear about the theological basis for such a life. Only then can we live effective lives in accordance with the truth.

As we have seen in this message, the life of faith – its beginning, continuation and consummation – must be centred on Christ, and lived out with the consciousness that we are members of His body, the church. God's intention is that every believer should grow unto maturity in Christ. This is meant to take place in the outworking of healthy church life, working out according to God's plan and instructions, and with each member of the body functioning well. As we progress in this way, the wisdom, the power and the glory of God will be manifested through the church, the enemy crushed, the perishing rescued, and the kingdom of God built up.

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