

Title: “By faith”

Chris Ryan

Heb. 11:17-31; 12:1-3

8/18/2019

Overview:

Life is full of trials: parenting, career, relationships, and just “life.” Our challenges are not unique, and we have a cloud of witnesses that show us what faith looks like in action.

Lesson:

We face our trials, our challenges, and our suffering by a faith that is nurtured and strengthened beforehand.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

I have been at St. Mark long enough to know that we have the best cooks and bakers the world over, so please don't think that I'm being condescending when I explain how to bake a cake. I call this the parent cake and it is one that I'm sure every mother here has made.

First, preheat oven; get out utensils and ingredients.

Remove blocks and toy from table.

Grease pan, crack nuts.

Measure two cups of flour, remove baby's hands from flour, wash flour off baby, re-measure flour.

Put flour, baking powder, and salt in sifter.

Get dustpan and brush up pieces of bowl baby knocked on the floor. Get another bowl

Answer doorbell

Return to kitchen, remove baby's hands from bowl. Wash baby.

Answer phone.

Return.

Remove one-fourth inch salt from greased pan. Look for baby.

Grease another pan.

Answer telephone.

Return to kitchen and find baby. Remove his hands from bowl.

Take up greased pan and find layer of nutshells in it. Head for baby, who flees, knocking bowl off table.

Wash kitchen floor, table, walls, dishes.

Buy it from Giant Eagle. Lie down

How many of you remember making this cake? I know that I have, and my parents have, and my parents' parents have, too. I also know that each of you can say the same thing – either about your

own children or about your own parents. And what you relate to, of course, is not about cake but about the trials and tribulations of raising a child. It's about the endless nights of sleeplessness as you comfort and feed your infant. It's about the inability to simply run to the store because preparation takes far longer than the shopping itself. It's about – well, let's be honest. It's about the terrible twos. And it's about the stress that you experience when you let go of your child's hand as they enter the first day of school – without you. And it's about the new sleeplessness as they begin to date. Oh, yes. I almost forgot. It's also about the teenage years – the sequel to the terrible twos.

We may laugh at this illustration, but we all recognize that underneath the humor is real life - and sometimes it's hard and sometimes it even hurts. Each one of us lives through our own sufferings: whether sickness, or joblessness, or divorce, or death. And as we walk through our dark valley, we find strength.

We find strength through the Holy Spirit as he is in constant intercession with God on our behalf. We find strength through the power of the Word of God as we dedicate ourselves to the Scriptures. We find strength through St. Mark as we surround each other in support and encouragement. We find strength through the knowledge and assurance that we are not the first to travel through this valley.

We also find comfort. We find comfort in knowing that our suffering is not unique. We can look back at the lives of everyone who ever came before us and know that they, too, have experienced these same trials.

And this is what our Epistle reading teaches us this morning. In every case we see not only the struggle but also how each person responded to it. Here are just a few of them:

“By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau”
“By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months”
“By faith the people crossed the Red Sea”
“By faith the walls of Jericho fell down”
“By faith Rahab did not perish”

But here's the interesting part. Notice that the phrase “by faith” precedes each act. This is telling because it means that they entered into these trials full of faith and recognition that God was with them and that He would see them through.

Let's go back to the first verse in this passage to see what I mean:

¹⁷By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, ¹⁸of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” ¹⁹He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

You see, Abraham didn't turn to God *after* he realized that he was being tested. He had turned to God *before* the trial even began. Long before this day the Holy Spirit found residence in Abraham's

heart and had begun the work of growing his faith. And as Abraham's faith grew, he became more prepared for the trials and tests that would be placed before him. It was exactly *because* of his relationship with God and his willingness to cooperate with the Holy Spirit that when he found himself tested, when he found himself being asked to sacrifice his only son, he could respond to it by faith. **By faith** he obeyed the God who promised him a son, and now asked him to give up his son.

Can you imagine how this scenario would play out if Abraham's faith was lacking? How different would his actions be? Where would Abraham turn? He couldn't turn to God because it was God who instructed him to sacrifice his son! Abraham would be lost, feel isolated and alone, and have no one to turn to.

So too is it with us. We are called to look back at the great cloud of witnesses and stay focused on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith. Through the waters of our baptism we have become adopted sons of God and are called to get to know him, to rely on him, to trust in him, always. We must allow the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts and build a faith as strong as the prophets of old. We must have faith in God *before* the trials of our lives so that **by faith** God will guide us out of our valley.

We do this by remembering that through our Baptism we were adopted as sons and daughters of God and our Father is watching out for us, sustaining us and providing for all of our needs.

We do this by supporting and strengthening each other in and outside of this church. We don't simply answer "good" after someone asks how we are doing, when really, we are so weighed down with pain and stress that we just want to cry. Instead, we reply with honesty, confident that the person asking is truly interested in our wellbeing. And, we even seek a prayer partner or Stephen Minister to walk with us through our valley.

And, finally, we do this through our constant communication with God. We never cease to talk to Him, to pour out our good and our bad, to leave nothing hidden, to pour it all out at His feet. And we know that He will answer us, strengthen us, and sustain us forever.

Let us pray.

Dear Jesus,

You know too well what suffering means for those that walk this earth. You cried out "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" as you hung on the cross - suffering excruciating physical pain but also the incomprehensible pain of being separated from God, your Father. You knew, before the first nail pierced your body, what was to happen, and yet **by faith** you entered into this suffering for our sake. Lord, we ask that you soften our hearts today so that our faith can grow through the work of the Holy Spirit so that we too, **by faith** can endure our suffering - both in the present and in the trials of the future. Lord, in your name we pray. Amen.