

Increase Our Faith

The Prayer of the Disciples

Luke 17:5

I appreciate the disciples. Their bald humanness shines out again and again. They repeatedly ended up with egg on their face or a foot in their mouth. Fear, doubt, ignorance, confusion, arrogance, and thick-headedness—they unwittingly displayed all of these and more. Reading about them in the Gospels never ceases to give me hope. If these guys could make it as disciples, then I have a chance.

One day Jesus was telling them about the need to repeatedly forgive repentant sinners. The disciples came back with a sincere yet comical response. Read it for yourself.

[Jesus said,] “So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” (Luke 17:3–5)

Don’t you just love it? Jesus told them to offer forgiveness seven times a day if necessary. The very thought of such “radical forgiveness” seemed so beyond them that all they could say was “Increase our faith.”

Somewhat innocently and inadvertently, the disciples again stumbled onto one of the most effective prayers written in the Bible, “Increase our faith.” They could not have prayed a better prayer.

The Bible persistently points to the priceless personality of faith. Faith is portrayed as the requirement for pleasing God (Hebrews 11:6). It is to be central in our lives (Romans 1:17;

Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38). It is the means of salvation unto eternal life (John 3:16; Acts 16:31). Faith is the activity that leads to a right standing before God (Galatians 2:16) and pure hearts with God (Acts 15:9). Faith helps us walk in the light (John 12:36, 46) and experience spiritual life (John 20:31). It is the victory that overcomes the world (1 John 5:4).

Jesus continually exemplified and addressed the ability of faith in God to accomplish amazing things. The disciples heard Him commend the centurion for his great faith and then heal his servant without even seeing him in person (Matthew 8:5–13). They saw Jesus heal a paralyzed man because of the faith of his friends (Matthew 9:2). They witnessed Him heal a woman who had the faith to reach out and touch the hem of His garment (Matthew 9:23), blind men who had the faith to ask Him for mercy (Matthew 9:29), and a demon-possessed girl because of the persistent faith of her mother (Matthew 15:28).

They heard Jesus say that faith has the power to move mountains and uproot mulberry trees (Luke 17:6; Matthew 17:18–21; Mark 11:22–24). He also said that all things are possible to the person with faith (Mark 9:23). Later, He told them that faith was a key to answered prayer (Mark 11:24). He demonstrated the potential of faith to heal disease, cast out demons, and release the miraculous (Matthew 8:2–3, 8, 13; 9:20–22; Mark 9:21–26).

The one thing Jesus repeatedly rebuked His disciples for and warned them about was being of little faith (Matthew 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20; Luke 12:28). The disciples cowered in the boat as the storm raged because they lacked faith (Matthew 8:23–27).

After successfully walking on the water, Peter sank when he lost his faith (Matthew 14:22–33). The disciples were incapable of grasping spiritual truth when they lacked faith (Matthew 16:5–12). Likewise, they failed to cast out a demon

(Matthew 17:14–21).

It would seem that the major lesson Jesus wanted them to learn from His ministry was to trust God. And they finally got it.

After repeated bouts of fear and failure, they realized what they needed was faith, and lots of it. So when Jesus again challenged their level of spirituality by calling them to radical forgiveness, the light bulb went on. The “aha” moment arrived at last, and they offered a short, sweet, powerful prayer.

Increase our faith.

An initial reading of the rest of the chapter might lead you to believe that Jesus ignored their request. Not so. The answer to their prayer is not found in the rest of the chapter or even Luke’s Gospel. To see how Jesus answered, you need to look at the book of Acts, Luke’s follow-up to his Gospel. It is a book that could well be titled “The Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles.”

The great faith of the disciples is on display in every page of the first half of the book of Acts. While the word faith is not always used, the concept is demonstrated through every event described.

In chapter one the disciples’ faith had grown enough to pray down the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, ushering in the birth of the church. In chapter two Peter’s fearless faith was front and center as the previous coward stood before thousands and boldly proclaimed the Resurrection of Jesus. His courageous faith led to the conversion of three thousand!

In chapter three the strong faith of Peter and John led to the miraculous healing of a lame man. Peter explained it this way:

By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know

was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see. (Acts 3:16)

Later, faith spurred Peter to preach to another huge crowd about the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Chapter four shows Peter and John being arrested for their brave preaching. By faith they fearlessly proclaimed the resurrected Christ in the face of stern opposition and refused to be silenced. After their release, the other disciples joined them in a faith-saturated prayer for greater boldness in the face of greater persecution, not deliverance from it.

Chapter five is the dramatic account of Ananias and Sapphira being exposed by Peter for lying to the Holy Spirit and the consequences of such an act. It also shows the powerful faith of the apostles as they did many signs and wonders and were even thrown in jail for their Christian witness. Subsequently, they were released by an angel and walked away, only to be brought before the authorities again. Their daring faith led to a beating but also shook the Jewish leaders to the point of letting them go.

Chapter six opens with wisdom-producing faith as the disciples develop a plan and select personnel to meet a logistical nightmare. They selected their ministry assistants on the basis of their faith (Acts 6:5). Chapters six and seven tell how one of their disciples, Stephen, a man "full of faith and power" (Acts 6:7), had been deeply challenged by the contagious faith of the apostles to preach Jesus so boldly that he was killed, becoming the first Christian martyr.

As the flames of fierce persecution swelled, the faith of the disciples became evident in the lives of their disciples. Chapter eight tells how they began to spread the gospel out from Jerusalem to Samaria and beyond. Both an influential sorcerer and an Ethiopian eunuch came to saving faith through their testimony.

In chapter ten the gospel jumped across racial and ethnic divides to reach the Gentiles. The instrument was Peter, the man whose faith had failed the night Jesus was arrested.

In chapter twelve the faith of the early church is severely tested. James, the brother of John, was arrested and executed. Herod, sensing a public relations bonanza, arrested Peter and put him under the guard of sixteen men who watched him four at a time, in four-hour shifts. During that time he was chained between two of the soldiers while the others guarded the door.

The church turned this problem into prayer and faced the battle on their knees. God heard and sent an angel, who suddenly appeared by Peter's side. Immediately the chains fell from his wrists. Unnoticed, Peter walked past the guards and the guard posts to freedom. Peter went looking for his friends and ended up being the surprise guest at his own prayer meeting!

The disciples prayed, "Increase our faith," and God did. These men, who had been guilty of being of little faith, ended up as men of outstanding faith. They had enough faith to launch the church less than two months after seeing Jesus brutally executed in Jerusalem. They had enough faith to continue preaching in the face of withering persecution. All would face torture and horrible deaths.

Church history is rich in describing the martyrdom of the church's founders. Church historian Gottlieb Schumacher researched the lives of the apostles. He discovered that Matthew suffered martyrdom in Ethiopia, killed by a sword wound. John faced martyrdom when he was boiled in a huge basin of boiling oil during a wave of persecution in Rome. Miraculously delivered from death, he was then sentenced to the mines on the prison island of Patmos.

Peter was crucified upside down on an X-shaped cross because he told his tormentors that he felt unworthy to die in the

same way that Jesus Christ had. James the Just, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, was thrown a hundred feet down from the southeast pinnacle of the temple when he refused to deny his faith in Christ. When they discovered that he survived the fall, his enemies beat him to death with a fuller's club.

Bartholomew, also known as Nathaniel, was a missionary to Asia. He witnessed for our Lord in present-day Turkey. Bartholomew was martyred for his preaching in Armenia when he was flayed to death by a whip.

Andrew was crucified on an X-shaped cross in Patras, Greece. After being whipped severely by seven soldiers, they tied his body to the cross with cords to prolong his agony. His followers reported that when he was led toward the cross, Andrew saluted it in these words: "I have long desired and expected this happy hour. The cross has been consecrated by the body of Christ hanging on it." He continued to preach to his tormentors for two days until he expired.

The apostle Thomas was stabbed with a spear in India during one of his missionary trips to establish the church in the subcontinent. Matthias, the apostle chosen to replace the traitor Judas Iscariot, was stoned and then beheaded.

James the Greater, a son of Zebedee, was ultimately beheaded at Jerusalem. The Roman officer who guarded James watched amazed as James defended his faith at his trial. Later, the officer walked beside James to the place of execution. Overcome by conviction, he declared his new faith to the judge and knelt beside James to accept beheading as a Christian.¹

Making It Personal

1. Big requests may take awhile to be fully answered. After asking Jesus to increase their faith, the disciples were not immediately men rich in faith. There were afraid to stand for Christ. Peter denied Jesus, Thomas doubted,

and, except for John, the others abandoned Him. Their faith did not blossom until after the resurrection. Although God is able to give us big answers instantly, we may not be ready to handle them. After asking for increased faith, the disciples had to grow through character-building experiences. God is always believable and trustworthy, but we have to grow into the type of people who can fully trust Him.

2. We are the key to the answer of some of our prayers. Faith is a choice. God can provide the reasons to believe, but belief is ultimately our choice.
3. God delights in faith and is willing to answer our request for more. Of all the things we can ask for, faith is one that God is always ready to give. So why not ask?

Notes

1. Grant R. Jeffrey, *The Signature of God* (Toronto, Canada: Frontier Research Publications, Inc., 1996), pp. 254–57. Note that the details of the martyrdoms of the disciples and apostles are found in traditional early church sources. These traditions were recounted in the writings of the church fathers and the first official church history written by the historian Eusebius in AD 325. Although we cannot at this time verify every detail historically, the universal belief of the early Christian writers was that each of the apostles faced martyrdom faithfully without denying their faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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