

Articles and Sermons :: By Faith, Not Sight - K.P. Yohannan

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Second Corinthians 5:7 says, "For we walk by faith, not by sight." Here we see that there is a clear distinction between faith and sight. The two are opposites; each excludes the other. When we walk by faith, we don't have to worry about how things look. If we walk by sight, there is no room for faith. We can see where we are going and so we simply follow the path we see. If you know how something is going to happen or know how to solve your problems on your own, you don't need faith. You don't need God if you can work it out without Him. But the truth is we always need God. Thus, we must always live by faith.

But in this quest to live by faith, we run into the very real conflict between our old nature and our new nature. There is a continual war between the two—the flesh and the Spirit, the temporal and the eternal, the walking by sight and the walking by faith. Our old nature demands to see, to experience, to understand. But the new nature is different. It is able to believe without seeing and feeling, because God has created that new nature in us.

We are a culture that demands to see proof. Scientists spend years running experiments just to show that some medicine or treatment works. Much like Thomas, who wouldn't believe the Lord Jesus had risen until he put his hand in His pierced side, we find it hard to believe anything we cannot see, declaring "seeing is believing." Please, let us not be like this. Jesus said in John 20:29, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." The Bible shows us a way of life that isn't dependent on only what we can see. Psalm 27:13 says, "I would have lost heart, unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living" (emphasis added). Matthew 21:22 says, "And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive" (emphasis added). Acts 16:31 says, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household" (emphasis added). In each of these passages, which comes first, believing or seeing? Believing, of course! First we believe and then we see! So, if you want to see something happen, start believing. Stop trying to see it first.

In John 11 there is the story of Lazarus, Jesus' close friend who died. Martha, Lazarus's sister, was crushed inside by the death of her brother, as I'm sure anyone would be. At the same time, it also seemed that she was a bit upset with Jesus. In John 11:20–21 we read, "Now Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met Him, but Mary was sitting in the house. Now Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.' But Jesus answered Martha by gently reminding her, 'Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?'" (John 11:40, emphasis added).

Martha was focused on the natural and concentrating on the facts. When Jesus had finally arrived on the scene, Lazarus had been dead for four days. There would be an odor assuring everyone of that fact. But Jesus said (paraphrase), "Please don't look at the facts, only believe. Believe first and then you will see." We cannot figure this out—yet we don't always need to. God requires nothing but our belief, even if it is only as small as a mustard seed. Have you ever seen a mustard seed? They are incredibly small, like a tiny little speck, the smallest seed of all plants! Even faith just that small, Jesus said, is able to move mountains! "I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20, NIV). Even when believing is difficult, He wants us to cry out, as the man with the epileptic son did, and say, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).

In Waiting

Abraham didn't walk by faith to obtain the promised son until it became clear that walking by sight with his own plans guiding him just wouldn't accomplish the purposes of God. God had promised Abraham and Sarah a son, and they had waited a long time for the fulfillment of that promise. As time went by, it seemed nothing was ever going to happen, and both of them grew impatient. This inspired Sarah to think of a plan: Abraham could lay with Hagar the maidservant and receive the promised son that way. In Genesis 16:2 we read that Abraham "heeded the voice of Sarai," listening to the voice of his wife rather than the voice of God. He lay with Hagar and, sure enough, she bore the son Ishmael. But this was a plan of the flesh to bring about the plan of God—and that will never work.

Later on in Genesis 17:18–19 it says, "And Abraham said to God, 'Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!' Then

God said: "No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him." God basically said to Abraham, "Yes, you got yourself a son, but no, I cannot bless a product of the flesh. Live by faith and let Me do it My way."

Until Abraham didn't know how to get a child, he didn't need faith. He walked by sight first, obtaining Ishmael, but he was not the son God had promised. Only when it was completely impossible—when both he and Sarah were too old and when their schemes to get a child their own way had failed—did Abraham have the faith to let God do it His way.

Most examples of the futility of walking by sight aren't so clear as this one. You can make your life look spiritual by obeying the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. You can walk by sight and it can look okay, even good. Mahatma Gandhi, the father of my nation, was known as a man who literally obeyed the Sermon on the Mount. When he died (as seen in the movie Gandhi), the last thing he said, translated in English, was, "O God!" But that translation can be deceiving. Gandhi was not calling out "O God!" to the God of the Sermon on the Mount or the God of the Ten Commandments, which he was so known for following. He was actually calling out "Hare Ram" or "O God!" to lord Ram, the Hindu god whom he followed. Even though Gandhi knew the good things Jesus said and even followed them, he still had no faith in Jesus Christ to save him. He walked by sight, by the good things he did, never having faith for salvation.

With deliberate willpower, people can rightly obey the laws and modify their behavior. This was the case with the story in Luke 18 of the rich young ruler who obeyed the Ten Commandments. He was the model individual, but just because he was perfect in obedience doesn't mean he lived by faith. The Bible says, "Whatever is not from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23). Sin is walking your own road, regardless of whether the road you choose looks good or bad to the rest of society.

Even today, a lot of Christian work is done by sight. There are Christian people who think they know how to carry out God's work. They think they know how to win the lost, grow fruitful ministries or attract the youth. But the truth is that if what you are doing is not done by faith, God will not bless it. God is deeply concerned that we do His work, His way, by faith. It is simply how things function in the kingdom of God.

Looking to God to Accomplish

Sometimes walking by faith seems passive and slow in coming to pass. Look at David's life. In the book of 1 Samuel, we can see how David endured much, yet he never resorted to fighting to make sure the crown God promised him would be his. He had faith that God would fulfill the promises He had made.

David started out as a mere child taking care of his father's sheep. On the day the prophet Samuel came to anoint the new king, chosen from David's family, his own father didn't even regard young David as one to be considered. It wasn't until Samuel had passed over all the older sons that David's name was even mentioned. Then, when David was finally acknowledged and Samuel poured the oil on David's head, anointing him as the chosen king, what did David do? Go and demand the crown and begin reigning? Not at all! He went right back to his simple sheep-herding.

It was only later, when David brought food to his brothers who were fighting the Philistines, that God showed His favor upon him, giving David the victory to defeat Goliath. When King Saul found out about this, he didn't step down right then and say, "Alright David, now you are the king." No. David's journey of obtaining the promise from God was, from then on, filled with dodging spears, running for his life and living in caves in the wilderness, hungry and destitute. Even David's wife gave up on him, and several times his band of followers threatened to leave. Once he even had to pretend to be a madman just to escape his adversaries.

Finally, after many years, David had the upper hand. King Saul, unattended and alone, came into the cave where David was hiding. This was David's opportunity to kill the king who had so earnestly sought his life, or at least to capture him! All those years of running could finally come to an end. Saul's life was in David's hand and at his mercy. But God did not want David to act on the opportunity this way. The temptation to walk by sight must have been so great. Yet trusting in God and not choosing his own ways, David allowed Saul to escape so that God could fulfill the promise of making him king in His own way and in His own timing.

Even after this incident, Saul didn't change. He was soon after David once more. This time God caused a deep sleep to come upon Saul's army, making it possible for David and his men to walk right up and take the spear from near the sleeping king's head. The men with David urged him to kill Saul. One said (paraphrase), "God has delivered Saul into your hands. What are you waiting for? Weren't you praying that God would fulfill His promise that He made to you?"

And here he is, just one jab with the spear and you can kill him!”

To strike Saul at this point would not have required scheming or conniving on David’s part at all. There would have been no manipulation or tricks. But still David would not do it. He would not do it because he believed God and His way of bringing things about. This journey of trusting God was not a one-or two-year struggle. It went on for many years. But David continued to live by faith, not by sight, choosing God’s way above his own.

Now take that into your world. Take David’s example of living by faith and apply it to your situation. I am saying this to you so that you would continue to lay aside your cleverness, abilities and intelligence. We must choose to walk by faith, trusting God to fulfill His promise in His way and timing.

I have my own experiences and lessons the Lord has taught me in choosing to walk by faith, trusting Him rather than my ability. For example, things don’t always go the way I would like them to in some of my meetings. I remember distinctly a couple of past experiences while speaking in churches, when, toward the end of my message, I would think to myself, “If only I could just say a few more persuasive words. If only I could present the need in this particular way, then I could get the job done. I could get that fruitful response. I could see them make that commitment.” But in those times, I also clearly remember how in my heart I felt, “If I say one more thing I will be operating in the realm of sight. I will be manipulating. I will be forcing it. If I say that, I will be using my God-given ability to convince people. I may get the job done, but it will be nothing but another Ishmael, my way of producing what God promised.” And I back off. By God’s grace, I let it go.

Seeing Things That Are Not Seen

In 2 Corinthians 4:17–18 Paul says, “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

The momentary and light afflictions that Paul spoke of weren’t easy, little problems. No! What he called “momentary and light” were big things—being shipwrecked, beaten, stoned and whipped! He was cold, imprisoned and hungry (see 2 Corinthians 11). Yet he called these afflictions “light” and “but for a moment.” He could say this because compared to the eternal weight of glory, they were just that—pale in comparison to what they were producing in him. Paul knew that the hardships were working in him something good and of great weight that would last forever.

There is a paradox, too, in what Paul is saying. How can we look at things that we don’t see? In 2 Corinthians 4:18 he writes, “the things which are not seen.” How does that work? It’s like a man who is blind saying that he is “going to see a movie.” How can you see things that you don’t have the natural ability to see? We find the answer in the example of Moses, for this is exactly what he did and what kept him trusting. “By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king’s anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible” (Hebrews 11:27, NIV, emphasis added). It’s that gaze—that looking to Christ—which gives us the grace to persevere in our journey of faith.

When I am faced with problems, disappointments, lack of resources or sickness, if I fix my eyes on the things that are visible, then all those difficulties discourage me and I get weighed down by the impossibilities. But when I turn my eyes to the invisible, fixing them on God, all those difficulties become instruments He uses to help me live by faith. By faith, those afflictions are used to change me on the inside so that I reflect His glory. These pains and hardships will lead to the benefits and rewards that He promised, if I would only trust Him in the situations of life. But if I do not keep my eyes focused beyond the problems, beyond the struggles and beyond the here and now and on God, then those promises will not come about, simply because I am not putting my faith to work.

I remember back to when I was 16 years old serving with Operation Mobilization. It was there that I first began to understand that every disagreement, every problem, every tension, every irritation happens in our lives because God has orchestrated it. He has designed it. God put us in that situation or with that person so that we would be changed into His image. You may say, “I don’t want this kind of problem.” But He has designed it just for you, to be an instrument to make you like Him.

The team I was on during this time consisted of eight or nine people, all from different parts of India. We all had different ways of doing things, and it was very difficult for us to get along. It was so bad that some days we couldn’t even be involved in outreach ministry because of the disagreements we had with one another. But one day, as we were all fighting and arguing, our leader explained to the team the lessons found in the life of Jacob and his experience with his uncle, Laban.

Jacob was a smart, shrewd, very cunning individual, his name originally meaning "deceiver." Jacob tricked his father out of his own brother's birthright and blessing. After doing this, he ran away from his father's house to stay with his uncle, Laban. I'm sure Jacob thought that he had made a clean getaway, safely hiding out with his uncle. But you know what happened? For the 20 years Jacob lived with Laban, he got the same medicine of deceit and trickery that he dishd out to his father and brother. God put Jacob with someone just like himself to create a broken and contrite heart in him. God wanted repentance and humility to replace the scheming and greed. And God used that difficult individual, Laban, to change Jacob's heart so he would become the man God wanted.

We need to recognize the purposes of God in placing difficult individuals or situations in our lives. We must see that it is through these adverse circumstances, like lack of food or funding, that we are able to experience the miracles of God. We have to see beyond the visible and look at the things that are invisible. This is what it means to live by faith. See your life through the eyes of faith and let God use the difficult things for your eternal betterment, for your blessing and for His glory. This is what He has promised, and this is what He will do.

By faith we can embrace difficulties rather than despise them. This is the message given in James 1:2-4. "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing." By faith you can say, "Lord, I thank You that You have put me with this difficult individual. I thank You for these adverse circumstances. Lord, You knew all this long before I was born. You put me here. You have something on Your mind. You want to do something through these hard situations that I cannot see. I submit, Lord. I don't want to fight. Take it and work it for Your eternal purpose."

Just Like Jesus

Regarding His death on the cross, Jesus said, "Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me?" (John 18:11). Do you notice whom the cup was from? Jesus knew that Pilate hadn't given Him the cup. He knew that the Jewish people hadn't given Him the cup. He knew that the cup had not been given Him by Judas. Jesus called it, "the cup which My Father has given Me." This was a cup of suffering and sacrifice of the greatest and most difficult kind, designed specifically by God for His own precious Son! Jesus recognized this and knew this. And because of that He was able to see beyond the natural to the eternal, infinite purposes of God. Can we say that with our little problems? When we can, then we are truly living by faith. Everything that comes our way comes only by God's approval, and He only approves of things that are meant for our eternal benefit.

Rest assured; God has a plan even in the midst of tears and tension. Look at the faith of those in Hebrews 11. There we read of miraculous healings and amazing victories. But please don't miss the fact that the road to those victories was paved with great perseverance, in the face of persecution and intense difficulties. God knows what is best for us, and He knows how to perfectly work in us His very own character, giving us the strength to endure the process. In every situation and with every hard-to-deal-with individual, He is "working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (2 Corinthians 4:17). When we live in the reality of this truth, we are able to accept with joy whatever He brings into our lives because we trust Him.

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