

Good Soil



A place for growth and nurture

Session 4.1: FAITH

INTRODUCTION: GROWING IN *FAITH, HOPE & LOVE*

In this short series, we will be thinking about the three Christian virtues named by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 13: ***faith, hope and love***.

While these are very common words in general use, we will be trying to dig deeper to explore their meaning and application for us as Christians. So, not just '*What is faith?*' but specifically: '*What is Christian faith and how can we have it?*' And the same for *hope* and *love*. We will be looking to the Bible to help us explore the themes, and once again thinking about how we can grow in these aspects.

We start off from the premise that we must all have these virtues, and even if we think they are very small in quantity, they are of great value to God and to one another, and always with capacity to grow.

PREPARATION FOR GROUP LEADERS

Please remember to keep in touch with your group and remind them of the date and time of the session.

An **activity** suggested in this session involves **mustard seeds**, and can be done as an individual or group activity. Mustard seeds can be provided, and you might like to grow a few little shoots in some soil a week or so before the session – to say 'Here's one I planted earlier!'

THINKING ABOUT FAITH (to read at home)

This session looks at the theme of **faith**.

Faith is a noun with two possible definitions (which are connected).

It is either *‘trust or confidence in something or someone’*.

Or it is *‘strong belief in the teachings of a religion, based on conviction rather than proof.’*

We might assume that Christian faith must be the second definition. We so often speak of ‘faiths’ meaning ‘religions’, and ‘people of faith’ meaning adherents of those religions. Faith is a positive and inclusive term, when we are speaking about different religious traditions. King Charles III once said that he would like to be seen as ‘Defender of Faith’ (rather than *‘the Faith’*), and his coronation reflected his respect for other religions and the importance of these in British community.

But in the days of the New Testament, Christianity was not so clearly defined as a separate religion. So, the word ‘faith’ when used in the Bible is far more to do with the first definition: putting our trust or confidence in something or someone. In fact, in both Greek and Hebrew languages, the word ‘faith’ can also be correctly translated as *‘belief’* or *‘trust’*. Faith in the Bible is therefore quite a personal word. To have faith in someone is to put your *trust* in them, or to *believe* in them.

However, even the word ‘belief’ leads to some confusion, especially when children argue about whether they ‘believe’ in Father Christmas or the Tooth Fairy! Religious belief (or faith) has in the minds of many been reduced to a simple matter of opinion or preference. When we say “I believe in God the Father...”, it is not the same as saying “I believe in Father Christmas”. We should not simply be expressing an opinion that God exists, but rather expressing a personal trust, faith or confidence in God.

If you were to say to a friend or partner, “*I believe in you*”, or “*I have faith in you*”, you would hopefully be expressing a lot more than the sheer fact that the person exists! It would express trust and confidence in that person’s qualities or abilities.

STARTING THE SESSION: FINDING OUR ROOTS

In small groups or pairs, discuss the following:

Apart from God, who do you trust? Who gives you confidence? In whom do you have faith?

Why? What causes you to have faith in them?

What organisations or institutions do you feel you can trust, or put your faith in?

Who or what have you lost faith in?

What would you look for in order to increase your faith in someone or something?

What does it mean for you to have faith in God, or to believe or trust in Jesus?

You might like to share some of your thoughts with the larger group.

A PRAYER

Faithful God,
as we gather together and explore our faith in you,
may you lift us from doubt, darkness, and despair,
bless us by your Holy Spirit,
encourage us through fellowship and friendship,
and help us to trust
in the one who has revealed for us your perfect love:
Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. Amen.

READING THE SCRIPTURES AND DIGGING DEEPER

Certain writings in the New Testament say that we are ‘saved’ through what God has done for us in Christ, and the way we obtain this gift of salvation is through our *faith* – our trust in God. This makes the point that what we gain, as Christ’s people, God’s children, is not through our own efforts, our own goodness or merits, but it is a gift, by God’s grace, undeserved but given in love. And then, we obtain it not through anything other than putting our trust in Jesus. Trusting what God has done, and in relationship with God through Christ.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2: 8-9, NRSV)

St. Paul here makes it clear that we cannot earn salvation for ourselves, but are invited to receive the gift through faith.

How do you understand this? How do you receive the gift of salvation? What does it mean for you to put your faith in Christ?

*And **how much** faith is necessary for a relationship with Jesus Christ? Do you ever worry that you haven’t got enough?*

Reading: Luke 17:5-6 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’ ⁶ The Lord replied, ‘If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea”, and it would obey you.

In this short account of one of Jesus’ sayings, his disciples are keen for their faith to be increased. This is echoed in another story when the disciples fail to cure a boy and Jesus blames their lack of faith:

Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’ He said to them, ‘Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, “Move from here to there”, and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.’ (Matt 17: 19-20)

In both readings, Jesus seems to be saying that a little faith is more than enough. He chooses the image of the tiny mustard seed to illustrate something small, which has the potential to grow.

In other parables, Jesus likens the mustard seed to the Kingdom of God (Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19). Once again, it starts off small but grows into something life-giving.

The motto of the county of Rutland is '*Multum in Parvo*' (Latin: "much in little"). *Can you think of other examples where good things come in small packages?*

Think about your own relationships, or the objects you put your trust in. Is the important thing the amount of faith you have, or the strength of the object? If you have enough faith to walk across a bridge, you are putting your faith in that structure to hold your weight. You may walk across nervously or confidently, striding boldly or anxiously clinging on, but as long as you have enough faith to take those steps, the bridge will do the rest.

How do you know if you have faith in God? What are the signs for you of your trust or belief?

We tried to think of five pointers to look out for, which not only indicate faith, but also grow with us, as our faith grows. Each one might start off very small indeed:

- A Awareness of God** (in life, prayer, or creation)
- B Belief in God's goodness and grace**
- C Community of fellowship and support** (the church)
- D Discipline of prayer and communion** (sticking with it)
- E Exposure to God's word** (regularly reading the Bible)

Which of these do you feel you have in abundance, and which would you like more of?

What other things would you add to this list? (in alphabetical order, of course!)

DOUBTS AND TRIALS

Do you ever have doubts? Have life's trials thrown up challenges to your faith? Asking serious questions about God can be a very positive thing, although it may be daunting at times, and may result in your understanding being re-shaped. But don't worry, if God is to be relied upon, like a strong fortress, God can withstand whatever doubts or questions you may have. The Bible does not pretend that Christian faith is easy, as St. James wrote:

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy,³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance;⁴ and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1: 2-4, NRSV)

Another passage on a similar theme is **Hebrews 10:32 – 11:3** (and then the rest of chapter 11 is all about the faith of many biblical characters). It is worth reading this at home.

Some words of a hymn to reflect on (or use as a prayer):

God of my faith, I offer you my doubt,
for life at times seems far too dark for me,
and my belief becomes more insecure,
when worldly cares produce uncertainty.

God of my hope, I offer you my fear,
when I am scared by my anxiety,
when all I hear is suffering and woe,
in all my shadows you will walk with me.

God of my joy, I offer you my grief,
when I sink down in sadness or despair,
when in depression I cannot be touched,
I pray in all my depths to find you there.

God of my love, I offer you my pain,
when I'm alone and feel nobody cares,
in aching age or in rejected youth,
you bear my cross and dry my human tears.

God of my life, I offer you my dreams,
light in the darkness where I hide from view,
light in my faith, my hope, my joy and love,
light in my life and all my life in you.

by **Colin Ferguson** (b. 1937),
Taken from *Singing the Faith*, no. **629**.

You might also like to start a '**Faith Journal**', where you record any prayers, signs of God in your life, pictures, poems, conversations or moments of inspiration. Keeping a record of these things and looking back can be an encouragement in times of doubt or trial.

ACTIVITY AND MEDITATION: MUSTARD SEEDS

Take a single mustard seed and hold it.

What do you notice about it? How significant does it seem?

It is next-to-nothing, and yet it is something.

Held in between your fingers, it is only a seed.

It is potential, but nothing more.

Now find some good soil in which to plant it.

Make a little hole and push it in.

The small seed of faith can grow when it is put into something reliable and trustworthy, something good.

Don't forget to water it. And watch it grow.

Watch it reach its potential.

We all have potential – seeds of faith, of differing size, but most important is what we put our faith in.

What is our faith planted in? What are we watering it with? Are we making sure the Son shines on it?

(Why not bring your mustard shoots in next time and encourage one another with what you have grown!)

A prayer from St. Paul:

*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts **through faith**, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.*

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

(Ephesians 3:14-21, NRSV)

PRAYING TOGETHER

- Thank God for the faith you have, small as it may be, and the signs of that faith in your life;
- Thank God for the people you trust or rely upon, and the qualities they have;
- Pray for those who live in relationships where trust has broken down;
- Pray for those who find it difficult to find or hold on to faith;
- Pray for an increasing in faith in our Lord Jesus Christ;
- You might like to say **the Lord's Prayer** together.

SUGGESTED SONGS TO LISTEN TO (or your own choice)

You can find these by searching on  **YouTube**

Faith Above Fear, by Feast Worship

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V5z4VqK5ryE>

Bloom, by Mitch Wong

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcWrUX_ZK3A

Give me Faith, by Elevation Worship

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNwt7LQIYck>

COMING SOON in GOOD SOIL:

SESSION 4.2: HOPE

SESSION 4.3: LOVE

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