

Growing in Faith
2 Thessalonians 1:1—4

One reoccurring theme in Paul's 13 books is that of increasing, or growing, in our faith. As he writes to the Thessalonians, he remarks that their faith has grown greatly (verse 3), so much so that Paul upholds them as examples to other churches (verse 4). Their faith was evident months earlier when Paul wrote his first epistle to them. He mentions their work of faith (1 Thessalonians 1:3) that was noteworthy to a wide area of churches (1 Thessalonians 1:8). In spite of their strong faith, Paul encourages them to continue to grow and perfect their faith (1 Thessalonians 3:10).

We often speak of our faith and know that we need to grow in our faith, but just what exactly is faith? How do we actually grow in faith and how do we know if we are growing in faith? These are some basic questions that every Christian needs to know and understand.

What is faith?

To understand what faith is we need to define the word faith. If we have faith it can be said that we have a firm conviction, a belief or a trust. By saying we have faith in something or someone, we are believing or have trust in that thing or person. Salvation is believing in, or putting our trust upon, Jesus Christ.

We can see faith in action with Abraham when God told him to leave his family. He believed God and obeyed (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3, Hebrews 11:8). Abraham put his faith in God and proved it by obeying what God told him to do. His faith was proved by his faithfulness. His faith in God was tested when God told him to take Isaac and offer him up as a sacrifice. He trusted God and by faith did what God instructed him, even if he didn't fully understand.

On the negative side, we can see how the Disciples' faith in Jesus was not as strong as it should have been. Jesus, a number of times, rebuked them for not having enough faith (Matthew 8:26; 14:31; 16:8). In these cases, it had nothing to do with salvation, but in believing Jesus could handle the events that beset them.

Faith, then, is believing or trusting what God has said. Our faith is proven by obedience. If we have faith we will do what He tells us to do.

Growing in faith

When Paul speaks of those who are **of** the faith, he is speaking of believers (Galatians 6:10). However, Paul also admonishes believers to grow **in** their faith (2 Corinthians 10:15; 2 Thessalonians 1:3). Only those who are **of** the faith can grow in their faith.

The first thing to notice about growing in faith is that it is observable and therefore measurable. Paul knew the condition of their faith because he could observe what they were doing. Notice that Paul sent Timothy to the Thessalonians to find out how their faith was doing (1 Thessalonians 3:5—6). How would Timothy have known about the condition of their faith if it were not readily evident? When believers are growing in their faith there will be external demonstrations of that growth. We are thus capable of observing each other and recognizing if someone is growing or stagnating in their faith.

Another observation about faith is that it is dependant on knowledge of Scripture (God's word).

According to Romans 4:20 Abraham grew strong in his faith as he waited for God to deliver on His promise of to make him a great nation. Abraham's growth in faith came about because he did not waver on believing God's word in spite of he and Sarah aging well beyond childbearing age. As he and Sarah aged, I'm sure it became harder and harder for him to take God at His word. However, according to Scripture, he did. (Note: many think Abraham did waver when he had a

child through Sarah's handmaid, Hagar. This is not the case. Abraham always believed God would do what He said but didn't know the means by which He would do it. Abraham and Sarah attempted to fulfill God's promise by human means but always believed that they would be the parents of a great nation.)

Romans 14 contrasts the believer who is strong in the faith with one who is weak. The person who is strong in his faith is the one who understands his freedom in Christ and therefore is free to eat anything given to him. On the other hand, the believer who is weak in his faith avoids certain food because he does not understand his freedom. While both are glorifying God by their actions, the one who has the deeper understanding of God's word is the one who is strong in the faith. In this case, the stronger brother understands he is no longer under any form of the Law and is free to eat anything without being condemned. The weaker brother has not yet understood he is under grace instead of the Law (Romans 6:14; 7:4, 6). If all believers were to go back to God's Word then all would have the same idea of whether something was proper to eat.

Another observation is that the stronger brother needs to be sensitive toward those who are weaker. A person who is truly strong in the faith will do things with the weaker brother in mind so as not to cause him to stumble. Not only does the stronger believer have a deeper understanding of Scripture, but he will apply this knowledge in love. He does not do anything to cause another believer to stumble, but instead does things that will edify (Romans 14:10, 19).

Unity of the faith

Ephesians 4 is rich in information in what is expected from each member of the body of Christ. Verse 13 presents the goal, that of each member growing up to be at the same level of faith, which is perfection in Christ. We do this through the knowledge of the Son of God, until we have become perfected. In order to accomplish this, God has given to us apostles (when Paul wrote this, apostles were still in existence. Apostles were sent ones who were sent out to announce the good news of God's grace and worked to nurture spiritual growth), prophets (like apostles, this office ended with the completion of Scripture. Prophets were used by God to bring His word to the people. Today God speaks to us thorough Scripture), evangelists (who proclaim the good news of God's Grace) and teaching pastors (who teach people what God's word means and how to apply it). I believe we will all reach the unity of the faith but that won't happen until the rapture. At that point there will be no need for these gifts of apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor/teachers.

Our goal, in our Christian walk, is to grow up or mature in our faith and to bring every believer along with us. This begins with knowledge but is perfected in taking action. If we don't have the knowledge of what God wants us to do then we will not be able to put our faith into action. This is how Paul knew the Thessalonians were growing in their faith. He could see his teachings, which came from Jesus Christ, being put into action. The Thessalonians were so adept at taking what they were taught and applying it to real life that their faith was proclaimed throughout the whole region (2 Thessalonians 1:3—4).

However, their faith was shaken when they received a letter, supposedly written by the Apostle Paul, saying that they were now in the Tribulation. Instead of believing what Paul had originally taught them, they accepted this false letter as true because of being persecuted. That caused them to believe they were indeed in the midst of the Tribulation. They took their eyes off of God's word (spoken and written by the Apostle Paul) and put faith in their own experiences. They have given us a great example of what happens when the believer does not build his faith solidly on Scripture.

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