

Text: Acts 20:22-25; 36-38
Intended audience: Christians
Topic: Faith
Theme: Enduring faith.
My purpose for this message: To help people gauge their faith.
Delivered: Dec. 5, 2004 @ KEFC

[Book Thesis: The Power of God Spreads the Gospel]

My Faith

I'm going to ask you to do something this morning that you may not normally do: take notes: I just want you to write down 5 things and I'll let you know what they are.

A man now living in Egypt has a riches to rags story to tell. Raised in a wealthy family, he learned to be a faithful Muslim through diligent study of the Koran. Sharp and intelligent, in business he even outstripped his father. His empire grew to include several businesses in the US, and a sports franchise.

Some of his American associates were believers and began to tell him about Jesus. Annoyed, he began avoiding them. On a business trip one day, he was boarding a plane in the states when he noticed that the man behind him in first class, was staring at him. This thought flashed through his mind, "I hope he's not another one of those Christians."

He was. Sometime during the flight the man passed a booklet to him between the seats. It read, "The Four Spiritual Laws." It was a divine appointment and eventually, this Muslim man repented and placed his faith in Jesus Christ.

When his conversion became known, his family disowned him. No ex-Muslim can do business in a Muslim world long, he soon lost his empire *and* his property. His family urged the police to persuade him to return to Islam. Attempting to do so, they left purple scars on his legs that you can still see. (Paul calls them the "marks of Jesus" in Gal.6:17: *...let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.*) Despite the marks of Jesus, this penniless Egyptian Christian is filled with joy. What is it that produces that kind of faith? PRAY.

Today, we again draw from Paul's farewell speech to the Ephesian church elders; talking about the caliber of his faith. READ Acts 20:22-25, 36-38. PRAY.

God had informed Paul about his future: "hardships, prison, and death following it all (25 & 38). Yet he was remarkably undeterred (v.24)." Had you asked the men who traveled and worked with Paul, "What's his faith like?" They would have answered, "Gutsy. There's nothing he won't risk for Jesus."

But if you had *then* been suggested, "Well, then, I guess Paul's never afraid," they would have doubled over with laughter, "Of course he sometimes is." *No* one is unmoved by the stuff *he* endured: beatings, stonings, whippings, no clothes, no home, no money, no friends, great sorrow; you name it (even *Jesus* dreaded his suffering).

- Anxiety (Phil.2:28)
- Fears (Eph.6:19-20; 1 Thess.3:5; 2 Cor.1:3-11) If George MacDonald was right that "a perfect faith would absolutely lift us above fear," then Paul's faith was not perfect.
- Sorrow (Phil.2:27)

So Paul was emotionally human. And *spiritually* human. It would be a serious mistake to conclude that he had some unique gene or personality trait that we don't have. That he *could* be a spiritual giant, but we can't.

I'm going to talk about 5 things that reinforced Paul's faith. Rebar is the steel reinforcing rod that is the heart and soul of poured concrete; it's what makes concrete strong. Join these 5 faith reinforcers down. (NOTE: "faith" is the ongoing trust in God, not the thing that simply saves you. Saving faith, living faith, sustaining faith.)

1. Rebar #1: Intercessory prayer

Paul counted on others praying for him. "Hey, Christians in Thessalonica, pray for us." (1 Thess.5:25). In fact, he closed 4 of his letters with specific pleas for prayer. READ Rom.15:30-31. The intercessory prayers of others reinforced his faith, and his reinforced theirs. READ Eph.1:19-20.

2. Rebar #2: A dependency on God.

Paul depended on God. READ 2 Tim.4:16-18. Instead of depending *most* on people, on money, on a change of circumstances, Paul depended *most* on God. READ 2 Cor.1:3-11.

3. Rebar #3: A disregard for human approval

Some people liked Paul, some didn't, and some were indifferent. While those he'd labored over disappointed him if they turned away, ultimately, whether people admired or despised him, he craved *divine* approval, not human. READ 1 Thess.2:4.

4. Rebar #4: A passion for men's souls (love).

God sent Paul to preach about Jesus. But when he did it, it was more of a passion than simply a calling. He loved people so much that in Rom.9:1-3 he claimed he'd willingly give up his own salvation if it would mean the salvation of his people.

READ 1 Cor.10:33b. Sometimes the agony of his concern sounds like a man hemorrhaging. READ 2 Cor.5:18-20. Prison was acceptable (Phil.1:12-14), suffering was acceptable, torture was acceptable, ridicule was acceptable AS LONG AS PEOPLE GOT SAVED.

5. Rebar #5: An anticipation of heaven.

And finally, this world was not Paul's home. Heb.11:13 says that God's people have always accepted that they are "aliens and strangers on earth." V.16: *they long for a better country—a heavenly one.* Paul lusted after heaven. Except for any remaining ministry, nothing held more excitement for him than seeing Christ. READ Phil.1:21-23.

The rebar of Paul's faith: intercessory prayer, dependency on God, disregard for human approval, passion for men's souls, anticipation of heaven. Which is rebar for you?

1. Who is it that prays for you? I mean beyond your blood family, in the bloodbought family? The church? Who will you permit to know enough things about you to pray for what sorely tries your faith?
2. Do you depend mainly on God? Some people bank mainly on their wealth; or friends. Some count on the government to keep them in their old age, or to keep their streets safe. The ill count on their physicians or surgeon. These are all good things or good people, I'm just asking where our greatest confidence lies: in these substitute gods, or in the MOST HIGH?
3. Are you looking to be popular with people, or God? When you think about opening your mouth about Jesus to an unbeliever, does his/her approval matter most, or does God's?

4. Do you have a passion for souls? One way to determine that is by your prayer life: are you praying for the salvation of people you know? Or, how do you spend your money? In Lk.16:9, Jesus reminds followers that the day will come when their wealth will be gone. So use it while you have it to gain friends so that you will be richly received in the afterlife. Are we reluctant to give money to the Lord's work, or do we look for ways to give *more* to God's work because souls are so precious to us?
5. And lastly, do you look forward to heaven? Mel and Pam Lapp will tell you, having someone in heaven you're looking forward to seeing, increases its attraction. Well, *all* of us have someone there: Jesus. As the song says about the new arrival in heaven who ran into Paul's protégé "Timothy, I want to see Jesus; 'cause he's the one who died for me.

What's the caliber of your faith? Is it reinforced, or is it brittle? It is suffering, disappointment, rejection, unfulfilled wishes, grief, tragedies and other undesirables that reveal the true caliber of our faith. Victor Frankl said, "A weak faith is weakened by predicaments and catastrophes whereas a strong faith is strengthened by them."

Concl:

You know that Afghanistan is a Muslim country. What you may not know is that the gospel arrived there already in the 1800's. In the early 1900's, Qazi Abdul Karim came to faith in Christ in Pakistan. This son of a Muslim judge had a passion to tell Afghans about Jesus. In 1906 he traveled to Kandahar where he shared the gospel. He was arrested and terribly tortured during an attempt to make him deny Christ. He refused.

He was marched 300 miles to Kabul with a horse's bridle in his mouth and a 70 lb. chain around his neck. Again asked to say "There is no God but Allah and Mahammed is his prophet," he refused. His right arm was severed. Again he refused. He lost his left arm. When yet he refused a third time, the coup de grace was delivered.

READ 2 Tim.4:6-7: *⁶For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. ⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.*