

TITLE: "What Is Faith?"

TEXT: Hebrews 11:1 (NT pp. 225) "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Introduction – How important is faith?

Years ago, a nun was given a mission assignment with the Apache Indians. She was so excited, that she drove right past the gas station on the way to reservation, not realizing that she needed gas. When she ran out, she hitched a ride back.

The attendant said he would be glad to help her, but had no container for the gas. They rummaged through the storage shed out back and the only thing they could find was an old bed pan. The nun said oh well and the attendant filled it with gas and she walked back to her car without spilling a drop.

She was carefully pouring the gas into the tank when a truck pulled up. The driver watched her for a few moments and then stuck his head out of the window and said, "Ah sister, I wish I had your faith."

How important IS faith? ...As a matter of fact, it is a matter of life and death. The Bible says: "For by grace you have been saved THROUGH faith... (Ephesians 2:8). Where you will spend eternity depends upon God's grace and your faith. So, let's take a look at faith....

1. Faith is trusting God, not just in our heads, but in our actions

What IS faith? ...Faith is trusting God; not just in our heads, but in our actions.

And sometimes the only difference between a stupid decision on our part, and an act of faith, is that we learn to trust God more in the process.

Let me tell you a story. It's a true story. It was written by Stephen Saint and I found it in *Guideposts* way back in January 1991 (over 20 years ago).

For years I'd thought Timbuktu was just a made-up name for "the ends of the earth." When I found out it was a real place in Africa, I developed an inexplicable fascination for it. In 1986, I was on a fact-finding trip to West Africa for Mission Aviation Fellowship and this fascination became an irresistible urge. Timbuktu wasn't on my itinerary but I knew I *had* to go there

But once I arrived, I discovered I was in trouble. I'd hitched a ride from Bamako, Mali, 500 miles away, on the only seat left on a Navajo six-seater airplane chartered by UNICEF. Two of their doctors were in Timbuktu and might fly back on the return flight, which meant I'd be bumped, but I decided to take the chance.

Now here I was, standing by the plane on the windswept outskirts of the famous Berber outpost. There was not a spot of true green anywhere in the desolate brown Sahara landscape. Dust blew across the sky, blotting out the sun as I squinted in the 110-degree heat, trying to see the mud walled buildings of the village of 20,000.

The pilot approached me as I headed for town. He reported that the doctors were on their way and I'd have to find another ride to Bamako. "Try the marketplace. Someone there might have a truck. But be careful," he said. "Westerners don't last long in the desert if the truck breaks down, which often happens."

The open-air marketplace in the center of town was crowded. Men and women wore flowing robes and turbans as protection against the sun. Most of the Berbers' robes were dark blue, with 30 feet of material in their turbans alone. The men were well-armed with scimitars and knives. I felt that eyes were watching me suspiciously.

I went from person to person trying to find someone who spoke English, until I finally came to a local gendarme who understood my broken French. "I need a truck," I said. "I need to go to Bamako."

Eyes widened in his shaded face. "No truck," he shrugged. Then he added, "No road. Only sand."

Was going to Timbuktu a stupid decision or was it an act of faith? Sometimes the only difference is if we learn to trust God more in the process. So we'll see which it was in a minute when I continue the story.

2. Faith is NOT the absence of doubts

First let me say one thing about what faith is NOT. Faith is NOT the absence of doubts. The absence of doubt is certainty. Faith means believing in the midst of our doubts. Faith means believing in the midst of our doubts.

Let's go on with the story...

Suddenly I had a powerful desire to talk to my father. Certainly he had known what it was like to be a foreigner in a strange land. But my father, Nate Saint, was dead. He was one of five missionary men killed by the Auca Indians in the jungles of Ecuador in 1956. I was a month shy of my fifth birthday at the time, and my memories of him were almost like movie clips: a lanky, intense man with a serious goal and a quick wit. He was a dedicated jungle pilot, flying missionaries and medical personnel in his Piper airplane. Even after his death he was a presence in my life.

I'd felt the need to talk with my father before, especially since I'd married and become a father myself. But in recent weeks this need had become urgent. For one thing, I was new to relief work and the strain of the harsh environment, and the severe suffering of the starving peoples, had left me feeling lost in a spiritual and emotional desert. Also, for the first time in my life, I was surrounded by people who did not share my faith, who were, in fact, hostile to Christianity. In a way, it was a parallel to the situation dad had faced in Ecuador. How often I'd said the same thing that dad would have said among those who had killed him: "My God is real. He's a personal God who lives inside me, with whom I have a very special, one-on-one relationship." And yet the question lingered in my mind: *Did my father have to die?*

Faith is NOT the absence of doubt. The absence of doubt is certainty. Faith means believing in the midst of doubts. Stephen Saint had doubts. We will see if he continued to believe in a minute when I continue the story.

3. Faith always leads to a deeper trust in Jesus and a life that is being transformed

First, let me ask a question: How do you know you HAVE faith? ...If you DO have faith, Jesus will become more and more important and you will become less and less important. ...And, if you have faith, your life will begin to be transformed.

Martin Luther King spoke of this transformation when he said: "I am not the man I could be, and I am not the man I should be, but thank God, I am not the man I was."

Evelyn Waugh the famous satirical novelist, who was as caustic in person as he was with his pen, was once asked: "Mr. Waugh, how can you behave as you do, and still remain a Christian?" He answered, "Madam, I may be as bad as you say, but believe me, were it not for my religion, I would scarcely be a human being."

You know you have when your life begins to be transformed.

Now let's get back to the story. Remember Stephen was in Timbuktu trying to get a ride across the Sahara Desert to Bamako, but there was no transportation available.

"God," I found myself praying as I looked around the marketplace, "I'm in trouble here. Please keep me safe and show me a way to get back. Please reveal Yourself and Your love to me in the way you did to my father."

No bolt of lightning came from the blue. ...[But] then I remembered that just before I'd left, a fellow worker had said, "There's a tiny Christian church in Timbuktu, which virtually no one visits. Look it up if you get the chance."

[So I went to the church where I met a young Christian man named Nouh. Nouh led me to a compound where there was an American missionary who was willing to translate. Then Stephen asked Nouh:] "How did you come to have faith?"

Nouh answered, "This compound has always had a beautiful garden. One day when I was a small boy, a friend and I decided to steal some carrots. It was a dangerous task: we'd been told that *Toubabs* [White men] eat nomadic children. Despite our agility and considerable experience, I was caught by the former missionary here. His name was Mr. Marshall, and he did not eat me. Instead, he gave me the carrots and some cards that had God's promises from the Bible written on them. He said if I learned them, he'd give me an ink pen!"

"You learned them?" I asked.

"Oh, yes!" Only government men and the headmaster of the school had a Bic pen! But when I showed off my pen at school, the teacher knew I must have spoken with a Toubab, which is strictly forbidden. He severely beat me." ...When Nouh's parents found out he had portions of such a despised book defiling their house, they threw him out and forbade anyone to take him in; nor was he allowed in school. But something had happened—Nouh had come to believe that what the Bible said was true.

Nouh's mother became desperate. Her own standing, as well as her family's, was in jeopardy. Finally she decided to kill her son. She obtained poison from a sorcerer and poisoned Nouh's food at a family feast. Nouh ate the food and wasn't affected. His brother, who unwittingly stole a morsel of meat from the deadly dish, became violently ill and remains partially paralyzed. Seeing God's intervention, the family and townspeople were afraid to make further attempts on his life, but condemned him as an outcast.

After sitting a moment, I asked Nouh the question that only hours earlier I'd wanted to ask my father: "Why is your faith so important to you that you're willing to give up everything, perhaps even your life?"

Nouh said: "I know God loves me and I'll live with Him forever. I *know* it! Now I have peace where I used to be full of fear and uncertainty. Who wouldn't give up everything for this peace and security?"

Then I asked: "It can't have been easy for you as a teenager to take a stand that made you despised by the whole community. Where did you get the courage?"

Nouh said: "Mr. Marshall couldn't take me in without putting my life in jeopardy. So he gave me some books about other Christians who'd suffered for their faith. My favorite was about five young men who willingly risked their lives to take God's good news to Stone Age Indians in the jungles of South America. The book said these men let themselves be speared to death, even though they had guns and could have killed their attackers! (*Through Gates of Splendor*)

The missionary who was translating said, "I remember that book. As a matter of fact, one of those men had your last name."

"Yes," I said quietly, "the pilot was my father."

As it turned out, there was unexpected room on the plane and Stephen was able to fly out of Timbuktu that evening. And he closed the story with these words: "It seemed incredible that God arranged for Nouh and I to meet 'at the ends of the earth.' And we each gave each other gifts no one else could give. Nouh gave me the assurance that God *had* used Dad's death for good. Dad, by dying, had helped give Nouh a faith worth dying for. And Nouh, in return, had helped give Dad's faith back to me."

Conclusion -

- Faith is trusting God, not just in our heads, but in our actions.
- Faith means believing in the midst of your doubts.
- How do you know if you have faith? ...Jesus becomes more and more important and you become less and less important. ...And your life will begin to be transformed.
- And, like Nouh, you will know, you will *know*, that Jesus loves you and that you will live with Jesus forever. ...Amen

C. S. Lewis wrote:

You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death. It is easy to say you believe a rope to be strong as long as you are merely using it to tie up a box. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. Wouldn't you then first discover you really trusted it? (*A Grief Observed*)