

## HOW TO GROW IN FAITH

Dr. George O. Wood

Today I want to take the word that the apostles once said to the Lord. They said “Lord, increase our faith.”

I'd like to share with you how to grow more in FAITH. And to share it in such a way that you can apply it to your life personally and we can all together apply it to where our church is as a body at this particular time. I want each of the letters of the word FAITH to represent a different element of faith. To do so in such a way that we begin at the beginning and culminate at the right ending of faith.

F – Focus. The first aspect of faith is to focus.

If we were to select an Old Testament example of faith it would be Abraham. One night God commanded Abraham, “Get out of your tent,” and then God showed him the nighttime sky and he said to Abraham, “As numberless as the stars, so shall be your descendants.” God took Abraham out of the stifling enclosure of his tent, showed him the unlimited canvas of the heavens, gave Abraham a focus which every night under the Palestinian sky he can look up and refocus upon what God was calling him to be. The stars were the focus of the fact that Abraham's generation was to be numberless. And that coming from to a man without a child.

The scriptures say in reference to this that Abraham believed God and it has struck me that when the scriptures say that Abraham believed it's not used in reference to the fact that Abraham believed something about God's nature. But rather Abraham believed what God had promised Abraham. Abraham's faith was not simply in the fact that God is an eternal Spirit. But Abraham's faith was located as well in the fact that God had given a promise to Abraham. He gave him a focus. The content of Abraham's faith, the focus of his faith was that God would act for him.

Faith requires an object. Faith requires a focus. Like Abraham from time to time we need to get out of our stifling enclosures of life and look and see within our hearts what God is calling us to be and see if it may have been that we have suppressed and buried some of the things that God has been talking to us about all of our life about becoming in him.

I have a rather regularly ordered procedure for sermon preparation I confess. It starts every Monday morning. I begin getting ahead on what is coming the next week. I have a cooking process – gathering the materials then putting them in the pot and letting them stew in prayer and meditation. Another way to say it is I've always sensed that to build a sermon is like building an altar. You do your part, you build the altar, then it's up to God to send the fire. If he doesn't send the fire all people get is a dry altar.

The spade work for most of my sermon preparation is just work. It's very rare that I get a sermon by revelation. This last Tuesday in the afternoon I was extraordinarily tired. My schedule has been rather pressed. I was so tired and not feeling too good that I left early from the office, postponed a couple of appointments and went home to get some rest. Then I remembered that I had a pile of papers to grade for the class that I teach and they were due. I graded those. About 3, 3:30 I finally got a chance to lay down. I was just getting ready to drop off to sleep when I was terrorized by the fact that I had made no progress yet on Sunday's

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sermon and didn't know yet where I was going for Sunday. I was thinking about, what should I share with the people on Sunday in regard to challenging us to believe in God.

While lying there the Lord began to give me this message. It was so exciting because I rarely get messages like that – by inspiration in that sense – that I woke up. I was no longer tired. God got me out of my stifling schedule, my routinized kind of way of living where he got me alone where for a few moments I thought I was going to get sleep. But like Abraham, he took me out and showed me the stars and expanded my mind.

It's amazing when you get a focus what happens to you, all the tiredness, the achiness just drips away and suddenly you become alive. Because you see a vision and a focus.

Jesus said "I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain go throw yourself into the sea and does not doubt it in his heart, it will be." But we've got to know what the mountain is though. You can't just go saying to all the mountains Disappear. Faith requires a focus. It knows a specific mountain. Faith has a target.

The Lord began reminding me that all my life he's given me targets. At 10 years of age he dropped in my heart an inspiration that someday I would be a pastor. That all through my life it seems that the Lord has been pleased to work with me in terms of working toward a goal, having a focus of what I had in mind, what he had in mind for me. Sometimes he initiated the activity, sometimes I initiated it.

I've learned to know that if you don't have a focus you're drifting. Jesus for example lived with focus. The gospel of Luke says, "He set his face to go to Jerusalem." He knew exactly what he was about. He never drifted because he had a focus.

If you have a negative focus you are failing. If you're looking at life from the standpoint of "It won't work... It can't be... I won't ever... It will not ever." It's a way of looking at the five loaves and two fishes and the multitudes. If you concentrate on the 5 loaves and 2 fishes the multitude will never get fed. Somehow at some point in your life you must determine to focus on the Lord's power rather than the limited supply and rather than your limited personality.

I think how sometimes we need to change a negative focus. The pastor of the great church in Seoul Korea tells the story of about the mother of an 18 year old girl who came to him for counseling. She complained about her awful daughter, her wicked daughter, her evil daughter, her immoral daughter. She wanted to somehow reach her daughter. The pastor stopped her after listening a while and said, "You need to begin saying that she is your wonderful daughter and your beautiful daughter, your lovely daughter." He explained to her that as long as she called her, her immoral, her evil, her awful daughter that she gave the girl no freedom to change. The woman went out from the study and put into practice what the pastor had told her to do. Within a matter of time she saw a marvelous change in her daughter. Her faith got a refocus on what could be.

If you've just been through a tragedy and there are all kinds of tragedies we go through, all the way from death to some kind of severe interpersonal relationship abrasion of relationship. Those kind of things can wipe us out. We go through tragedy. We lose focus. We get disoriented. We don't know what's happening. One of the needful things as difficult as it is somehow we're got to refocus and to see what God can yet have us be out of that experience.

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Paul is a person who lived with a focus. He said when he was at Ephesus writing to the Corinthians, 1 Corinthians 16:9 “A great door for effective work has opened to me and there are many who oppose me.” If he had focused on the many who opposed him and never gotten on with the work. But a great door is open to him.

I heard this last week someone say, When fear knocks faith answers. Faith has a focus. That’s why we look as an entire congregation at the mission God has called for us in this community we are establishing a focus for the whole church. When we look at what God may have called us to be on an individual basis or to do on an individual way we are saying faith begins with a focus. you cannot say be removed to the mountain unless you know what the mountain is. You cannot hit the target unless you know what the target is.

F is for Focus.

A – Agree.

It’s one thing to see a wonderful opportunity. It’s quite another thing to act upon it. I must begin to agree.

I’ve struggled all my life with an inferiority complex. I’ve thought of myself as stupid. It’s paradoxical to me that some people feel intimidated because there’s a degree associated with my name or position. Sometimes people think that the person with the degree or position maybe abnormal or something. I understand that. I used to think the same way. Anybody who had a degree you must not be able to talk with them. So it was paradoxical that I who always think of myself as so stupid people would think that they might not want to talk with me because they were stupid. And I’ve always felt stupid. That doesn’t make sense.

When I entered college I remember saying to myself, “I’ll never make it.” But I knew I had to. I was sure I’d fail sooner or later. When I entered seminary and was graduated from an unaccredited college and was competing against all those other people I said to myself I’ll never make it. But I made it.

When I entered a doctrinal program I said, I’ll get washed out of this. But I made it. I knew I had to do it but I wasn’t sure I was going to do it.

You say, Pastor you said the second word in FAITH was “agree”. It doesn’t sound like you did a lot of agree.” Jesus says “If you will not doubt in your heart,” that’s in reference to agree. That doesn’t mean you can never have a doubt now and then. It means if you will not go on doubting in your heart. It’s a persistent kind of way of speaking in the present tense. If you will not go on doubting in your heart. There’s no way, if God has put before you a goal, that you’re not going to face times when you wonder if it’s ever going to come to pass. You feel totally inadequate for it. I don’t think I’m stretching it too much to say that what Jesus meant when he said, If you will not go on doubting in your heart, is something like this, If you will not doubt more than 49% of the time! If the Lord will allow me to edit that, that way. But it’s a matter of degree and intensity to begin to agree for what the Lord has for you.

I remember when I was a junior in college my teacher came up to me and put his arm around my shoulder and said to me very serious, “George, I believe someday God’s going to give you a

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ministry to people who think.” I was stunned. I didn’t ever think anybody who thought would ever want to hear me say anything. I began to agree with that. Somebody else had to give me the faith and the focus and I had to begin to agree.

I find with faith it’s one thing to see the opportunity. It’s another thing to see that you’re a part of the opportunity and God wants you to be involved from your heart at least 51% and hopefully on to 100%. You’ve got to put yourself to it and agree. The most famous account in the Bible regarding the importance of putting the word “agree” with the word “focus” is the story of the twelve spies who went into the land of Canaan. Both of them had the same focus. They said the land is good. The land brings forth beautiful products. But the difference was ten of them did not agree that it could be done. They steadfastly did not persist in their heart to believe and to agree.

I’ve heard the phrase “If God wills it, if God’s in it, it will come to pass.” Dear friend, that is not always true. God willed for the children of Israel to move into Canaan. That was his will for them. But it did not come to pass because they did not agree. There are some dimensions of the will of God where not only must God will but I must will. And if I do not will it he has chosen not to will it. In no way do I diminish the sovereignty of God. God can do what he wants when he wants but it so happens that God in some situations conditions his sovereignty to our volition and says if you will will it, I will will it with you. You must agree.

Perhaps another word for “agree” is “obey.” I wish “faith” had an “o” in it because I would put obey along with agree.

I – Invest

You must not only focus and agree but you must act if God has shown you something. The farmer can focus on the harvest. He knows what it’s like to put seed in the ground. He can see the eventual product. And he can act. He must act if he is to see the final thing come into being. He must invest. He must take that which is precious which he could translate into bread for his own sustenance. He must take that and put it in the ground. He must risk it. Faith always risks.

I don’t know of any operation of faith that has ever been that hasn’t had risk to it. Looking at it from an analytical point of view you can say I’m not for sure it’s going to work. I don’t think it will work. There is no faith that can be guaranteed a 100% from the start that it’s going to mathematically add up. Faith is a venture. Faith is a risk. And it involves investing.

We’ve sensed that anew as we’ve struggled and wrestled with our Together We Build Commitment. We can to a moment where we wanted to invest and to risk.

Jesus tells the parable of the talents. And that’s a parable of investing. A talent is worth about \$1000 in our currency but we must remember the economy was a little bit different in biblical days. A person didn’t get \$1000 as easily as we get it now, not to say you’re getting it easily. It took five days to earn a dollar. A man worked fourteen hours a day, five days in a row and he earned a dollar. So at the end of five thousand days a working man would have earned enough to have one talent – one thousand dollars. In order to have five talents he would have had to work twenty five thousand days. In our currency the average Orange County Employed person earns eighty dollars a day. You may earn less, you may earn more. Twenty five thousand days times

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eighty dollars a day is two million dollars. So the parable of the five talents is the parable of the two million dollar man.

If somebody came along to me and says I've got an important thing for you to do. I'm giving you two million dollars and I'm coming back someday to ask for an accounting of how you did. What would you do with that two million dollars? Especially whether you're used to handling that kind of money.

Suppose I say that the person who gave it to me evidently wants me to see what I can do with it. so I get it into the market, I get it in escrow, I get into real estate deals, I get it into stocks. Whatever makes money I get it into. Then two weeks later he comes back and he says, "Where's the two million dollars that I gave you?" I say, It's all tied up. He goes to the person who has the one talent and he says, "Great. I've got it here. I'll give it to you." Do you think if the master had come back within two weeks that he'd be happy, that the parable would change? Now he'd be happy with the one talent guy who buried it and unhappy with the guy with five talents. Do you think it would change? I don't think it would.

Part of faith is investing. It's planning. It's saying what I have must be buried in order to come forth. It involved taking risks.

I think if the Lord came back within two weeks after giving the person two million dollars that he would say, Well done. And he would still chew the guy out who hid it in the back yard.

When I was a kid about 8 or 9 years of age for about a month we lived on a farm in Pennsylvania. At my dad's sister's place. I saw them kill a chicken one time. A hen, a laying chicken. They opened it up and to my amazement there was today's egg all fully developed, tomorrow's egg, and the egg after that... but they were all at varying stages of development. I was amazed at that. I had just thought the hen made the egg all in one day. Never in my boyhood mind realized there was a whole process involved.

For years I never got the theological truth out of that story. It was just a memory of my childhood. Then one day I was thinking about the parable of the talents. What if the Lord had come back early? All of a sudden it dawned on me about the chicken. The chicken was doing its work. It was doing what a chicken is called to be. If left alone and undisturbed it was making an investment in the future and its investment at the right time would have paid off.

But somebody who had greater authority over it than the chicken had over itself said this is the day that your life is taken. So the chicken was killed. It wasn't the chicken's fault. The chicken was doing its job.

If the chicken had lived, tomorrow's egg would have been delivered and the egg that was more undeveloped would have been more developed by then and laid and right on down.

I thought, that's what the Lord means in the parable of the talent. If he comes back he wants to come back to in a people that he sees there was the investment potential within them. He knows our hearts. He's able to look and say if we're focused on something, it's not our prerogative to tell him when he's going to return, but if he returns and something we've dreamed and worked for and invested in and focused on hasn't yet come to pass he's going to look at us and say like

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he said to David, “It was good that it was in your heart.” He saw that it was there. It was going to develop. It was going to come to fruition. You were investing. You were working.

There are some who say “The Lord is coming back soon so why should we do anything?” Why should you people go to school? I faced that. Why should anyone be building new churches? We should just give our money to missionaries in mass evangelism. Missionaries in mass evangelism are worthless unless the local church is there to catch the converts. All the results fall away.

People who’ve had that attitude – don’t do anything because the Lord is coming soon – have caused so many people in the body of Christ to mess up. Because they’ve caused them to take a view of the future which is not the Christ view. Our responsibility is to occupy until he comes. Jesus did not say, “Panic until I come!” He said “Occupy till I come.” The word which Jesus uses, which Luke uses in the Greek to describe “occupy till I come” is the word from which we derive the English word *pragma* – pragmatic. A pragmatic person is one who is nuts and bolts. Down to reality. Jesus is saying, “Pragmatize until I come. Be pragmatic. Be occupied in business. Have normal conduct going on. Occupy until I come. Invest.”

The Lord calls us to invest in the future. The time is in his hands. Our job is not to set the date and not to wander around like chickens with our heads cut off as we anticipate the end. But to be about our business.

I like what Martin Luther once said when he was asked, If you knew the Lord was coming tomorrow what would you do today? He said “I’d go out and plant a tree.” Potential. I’m not sure I’ve ever completely understood Luther.

If the Lord chooses to come and if our new church facility is half built on the day he returns he’s not going to be upset with us and say, You really wasted my resources. He’d say I know what was in your heart. I know the kind of influence in this community this church would had on that location. He’d say to us the same thing he said to David, “It was good that it was in your heart.” We must invest. We must believe. Get things out and get them working for a future dividend.

### T – Trust

This is where faith a lot of times gets in trouble. It comes short on trust. In the storm at sea the disciples are afraid that they’re going down and the Lord says to them, Why are you afraid? Have you no faith? They didn’t trust in the midst of the storm.

I like this phrase. My mother used it a lot and I’ve heard other Christian use it: Work as if everything depended upon you and pray as if everything depended upon God. I think that’s a neat balance in the Christian’s life. Trust in the Lord with all your heart, lean not to your own understanding. “In all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your paths.” Trust.

I think trust is important in the word faith because sometimes trust reorients us on the word focus. It’s always possible to have a focus that God wants to change. If we trust him he’ll have the freedom if he wants to get a focus to us that may be more in accordance with his will than the one we thought was in his will. If faith just simply means I give a short order and say, fill it. then I give him no room for trust in his judgment. So trust is a necessary balance for the word “focus”. I trust him.

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I remember the time in my life when I was most angry with God. I was angry for a whole year. I pouted for a whole year. And I was spiritually rebellious for a whole year. Because something I wanted in the area of focus didn't come to pass. I wanted to be student body president at Evangel college, my alma mater. From the day I entered the college that was my goal and three years later when the election was held I lost it. I said to God, "That's what I wanted to do. That's how I would serve you and you denied me the opportunity to serve you in that way. You can forget about me serving you for a while. I'm mad." Have you ever quoted a scripture back to Jesus "Whatever things you ask in prayer believing you receive them and it shall be done." And I said "God, I believed that I received it and it didn't come to pass. You don't keep your word. You can't be trusted. You're mean. You don't like me. You like the other person better than me." I was angry with God.

Only later did I begin to realize that God was working out something in my life that I didn't see. That he allowed me to have this whole focus thing in order to come out of the shy, inhibited, fearful nature that wouldn't get up and address a group. He wanted to get that out of me. And by letting me have that focus he was developing something else he wanted to put into play later on. And besides he was teaching me that not everything that I wanted was of him and I'd have to learn to trust him more in situations. And not get my spirit get out of shape when events seemed to bend me out of shape. Trust.

That's what faith really is all about – trusting God. It's not simply trusting that he'll do something that we "ordered" him to do but it's trusting him implicitly and believing if he's put a word of faith in our heart it will come to pass or something better will result. Either way we're going to win.

I love the definition of faith that is found in the example of Hebrews 11:32-38. Faith is described as trust. There are two categories of trust. "What more shall I say. I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Berek, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, gained what was promised, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames and escaped the edge of the sword. Whose weakness was turned to strength and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies." Wow! That's faith that succeeds. Tremendously successful people and Hebrews commends them for their faith that they were victorious.

But the paragraph doesn't stop there. It goes on to its second category. "Women received back their dead raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging while others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned. They were sawn in two. They were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated. The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and in holes in the ground." They were all commended for their faith.

Who was commended for their faith? The people who conquered foreign armies. And the people who wandered around in sheepskins and goatskins of whom the world was not worthy. All were commended for their faith. Faith at its deepest level is trusting God. It's believing on the one hand when he leads people to victory that he's in it. And it's believing on the other hand if the worst comes that we yet trust God. Trust is a key element of faith.

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Faith is not a magic button that we push. It is a deep seated conviction in the person and character of God who will prevail. Trust.

F is for Focus, and A is for Agree, I is for Invest and T is for Trust.

H – the last word is kind of what gets faith coming altogether in the end. Hold tight.

I shared this last week to several groups in the church. I was going through my files and discovered a letter dated June 19, 1972. It was written to the resident of southern California college. He's now with the Lord. My letter said something like this: "On behalf of the board of deacons of Newport Christian Center I'd like to present the following proposal for the consideration of the college board that we enter into joint usage on the property at Fair and Newport and we'll build our church there in return for which the college will be able to use the church as a chapel and that way the kingdom of God will be saved money. We won't have to buy the land and you won't have to build the building. In this way the kingdom of God can be better served."

Everything in the letter with the exception of one detail is identical to what we are actually entering into in 1980. But that was 8½ years ago. There were more letters than that. Three times that I went with similar proposals – 1972, 1975, 1977,. All were turned down. When the third was turned down I evoked Paul's words "Three times I besought the Lord about this. He said, 'No, my grace is sufficient for you.'" I thought if Paul asked three times and God said no quit asking, then that's what I'm going to do. So I quit asking. I wrote the District superintendent "Evidently it's not God's will for us to do this and if it ever is God's will then I expect it would go unanimously through the college board, unanimously through the presbytery, and unanimously through the whole district counsel which is association of about 400 churches of pastors and lay representatives. Nothing every goes unanimously through those groups.

Would you believe in 1979 it went unanimously through the college board, unanimously through the presbytery and unanimously through the district counsel.

One of the deacons of this church who's moved away said to me when I first came, said there are three things about the will of God – God's will, God's way and God's time. Those three things must line up. We sometimes may know God's will but it's not yet his way of bringing it to pass, and it's not yet his time. While waiting for his way and his time we've got to hold tight. Hang in there. Believe, trust. If it's God's will it will come to pass if we will it as well. It will come to pass.

In the old McGuffey's reader there is a story about a clock that had been running for a long, long time on the mantle piece. One day the clock began to think about how many times during the year it would have to tick. It counted up the seconds – 31,536,000 in the year and the old clock got tired thinking about it and said, "I can't do it." and stopped right there. When somebody reminded the clock that it did not have to click 31,536,000 seconds all at one time but rather only tick one by one, the clock began to run again and everything was all right.

Got to remember then when holding tight. Not everything has to come to pass today. It's important that *today* God will give me the measure of strength and faith that I need for *today*. Give us this day our daily bread.



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Habakkuk said it well. The prophet was asking God, why don't you do something about all the sin and evil in the land. And God said, I'm doing something about it. The Babylonians are going to come and invade your land. Habakkuk said, that's an awful perverted concept of justice. The Babylonians are worse than our worst people. And God said, Eventually I'm going to punish the Babylonians too. But you won't see it. All that rectifying of evil won't take place in your lifetime.

So what you are to do in the meantime is the just shall live by faith. What is to keep you in times when you don't see the end result? Faith. Faith in God. Holding tight.

I've had example of this in my own family. So many different members of my family who demonstrated to me of the value of holding tight believing God. I think of my uncle who in January 1927 laid his 5 year old boy and his wife within one week in the same grave in Tibet. He was a missionary to Tibet. His boy died first then his wife died of small pox. Both within a week. The ground was so cold it was too much effort to dig two graves so they dug one and put one on top of the other. He made the coffin with his own hand and dug the grave with the help of a servant. He then began to wrestle. He'd been in Tibet over 15 years. He'd been called of God to be a missionary in Tibet. He had the right focus, he'd agreed with God, he'd gone and invested his life and he trusted God and now this had happened. What was he to do? All those months he was wrestling as the Tibetan winter went on as it does. It's impossible to go anywhere. As the spring began to approach he came to a critical moment where he would decide what to do. Whether he would turn his back on Tibet or whether he would continue. He decided to continue and in fact became the first Caucasian to walk from the China side of Tibet to the India side of Tibet. The night before he set out he went out to the gravesite where his son and his wife lay and wrote this in his journal, "Until the furthest nook and corner of Tibet has heard the call of God and the story of redemption in Christ my task is not complete. Until the last man has heard the gospel witness my work is not done."

That to me is holding tight. It's saying persevere, continue, hold on. If we're to ever realize the full dimension of faith, faith has that final back up element to it which says, Hold on. In the storms of life I am quietly holding on to the things that cannot fail, to God who cannot and will not fail me.

What is faith? Faith is focus. Faith is agreement. Faith is investing, faith is trusting. Faith is holding tight.

Lord, the days come to us one at a time and you give us in the midst of great moments such as this a moment in the spirit to back off and to gain focus and direction. It may be, Lord, there are people here of whom and toward whom you have wanted to speak and share some treasure from your heart to them and to give them a reason for living, a reason for being. You're wanting us now as a result of this message today to ask anew within our hearts, God, what is it you want me to be? Lord, what is it you want me to do? It may be for us simply a vision of how our family can better reflect your personality. And how we can accomplish the communication and serenity and joy we have so long sought for. And in the midst of chaotic life have buried underground. Revive our dreams, Lord, of what we can be. Revive our dream and focus of what we can be and do in you. That characterizing our life can be love, joy and peace, patience and longsuffering, and kindness and gentleness, and goodness and self control. We agree with you, Lord, that that is what we want to see in our life. I give us too, Lord, the power to dream dreams for you of not being satisfied with simply the

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status quo but to reach out and to trust you that you are pushing us with your gentle Spirit into greater dimensions of being and capability and capacity. Help us, Lord, not to short change ourselves into something less than what you want us to do in your world and for your cause. Give us the power as a whole church in this time of critical phase of development in our body to trust you in all respects, to focus and agree and invest and to trust and to hold tight. We thank you and we praise you for your goodness and for the way your word comes to lift our spirit and cause us to again rely upon you. We bless your name through Christ. Amen.