

Ideas that Have Helped Me Live My Faith

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By Dr. Kent M. Keith

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Good morning! Thank you for the opportunity to spend some time with you this morning. I thought it might be useful if I shared with you a few ideas that have helped me live my faith. My hope is that my comments will get us started, and then we will have some time for discussion.

Faith and Beliefs

First, let me talk about the difference between faith and beliefs. We use the two words interchangeably in our daily conversation, but I think it is helpful to distinguish them. The reason is that our faith can be unshakeable, even as our beliefs change with new knowledge and spiritual growth. A change in our beliefs should not affect our faith.

The dictionary says that faith is confidence or trust in a person or thing. Our religious faith is about our confidence and trust in God. That faith can come from many sources— from the Bible, from the lives and teachings of people of faith, and from the wonders of the natural world around us. Faith can come from any experience that reveals to us that there is something more— something beyond the materialistic world, something spiritual and transcendent and inspiring. We may experience our own revelations in moments of joy, and peace, and love. We may experience revelations in moments of despair, when we call upon God to be with us in our pain. Whatever happens, we know that God exists, and we have faith—we have confidence and trust in him.

When we have faith, we know that God doesn't cease to exist just because times are tough, or we don't understand what he's doing, or somebody else says he doesn't exist. We know that our own actions can make God happy or sad, but nothing that we do, and nothing that anybody else does, can change the fact that he exists. He is there, loving us, and inviting us to have a relationship with him.

And that's what it means to live by faith: It means having a trusting relationship with God. When we have a trusting relationship with God, we can live with a sense of God's presence. We can sense his presence in our daily lives and work. Sensing his presence makes life sacred.

Without faith, we will have no relationship with God; we will be cut off from God's presence. So our faith needs to be unshakeable. We will have good days and bad days, and things will go well and not so well. But even when we experience sorrow and calamities, our faith can be strong. No matter what the world does to us, we can still have faith in God. We can still be confident of him; we can still trust him, we can still have a relationship with him; we can still sense his presence in our lives.

Now, let's talk about beliefs. In the religious context, a belief is a religious creed or doctrine or statement of faith. Our beliefs are *about* God. Our beliefs attempt to describe the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. So you might say that we have faith *in* God, and we have beliefs *about* God.

Historic creeds and doctrines were developed that still guide and inspire Christians today. The danger, of course, is that we may put our faith in our creeds and doctrines, not in the God whom the creeds and doctrines attempt to describe. In other words, the danger is that our confidence and trust will be in our beliefs about God, not in our God.

When that happens— when our beliefs or descriptions of God become the object of our faith, we may find ourselves clinging to our beliefs. We may not be open to any new religious insights that might result in new beliefs. We may not be willing to grow spiritually.

Another thing that may happen when our beliefs become the object of our faith is that when we realize that we can no longer accept a certain belief, we may feel as though we are losing our faith. But that shouldn't be a problem. We just need to remember that our beliefs are not our faith. Old beliefs may fall away, and new beliefs may replace them, but God is still God. We can still have faith— we can still have confidence and trust in God— even when we change our descriptions of him.

Let me try a hypothetical example from daily life. Let's say that I have a friend named Joe. Joe is a good human being. Joe and I work together in the same organization. I have learned over the years that Joe is honest and

hardworking and wise and friendly. It would be very natural for me to say that I have a lot of faith in Joe—I have confidence in him, and I trust him. I know that he consistently does the right thing.

I also have some beliefs about Joe. I picked up these beliefs as a result of conversations or comments made by others at the office. As a result, I believe that Joe was raised in New York, majored in English at college, served in the Marine Corps, and was once a Social Studies teacher at an intermediate school. I also believe he played basketball, and is six foot one.

Now suppose that one day a lifelong friend of Joe's comes to town, and I find out from him that Joe was raised in New Mexico, not New York, and he majored in history, not English. I learn that Joe served in the Peace Corps, not the Marine Corps. Also, Joe didn't teach Social Studies at an intermediate school, he worked with kids in the special education program at an elementary school. Finally, I learn that Joe did indeed play basketball in college, but he is not six foot one, he is 5 feet 11 inches tall. So I learn that a lot of my beliefs about Joe were not true.

That's a little unsettling. I probably misunderstood some of the comments that people made about Joe. Maybe I just made some assumptions on my own that weren't correct. So now I am going to have to adjust some of my beliefs about Joe, and that feels a little awkward.

But the real question is: So what? Joe hasn't changed, only some of my beliefs about Joe have changed. And the most important thing is that my faith in Joe has not changed at all. I still have a lot of confidence and trust in Joe. None of the new information about him changes the fact that he is a good human being, honest and hardworking and wise and friendly. I still know that he will do the right thing. My faith in Joe is not affected at all by a change in my beliefs about him.

This can happen regarding our religious beliefs. We know that our beliefs can change as we grow and mature spiritually. The simplest way to prove this is to study the same chapter of the Bible every five years. Each time you read it, you will see things that you did not see before. The Bible did not change—you changed. As a result, you may have new beliefs about that chapter of the Bible. That's why we continue to study the Bible, and listen to sermons, and go on retreats, and try to live our faith in daily life.

I don't think there is anything to fear in this process of spiritual growth and new beliefs. Changing a belief about God does not change God. It just means that we have a new way of describing or understanding him.

When we know that our faith is unshakeable, but our beliefs about God can change with new spiritual insights, we don't have to feel threatened by other people's beliefs. There are doctrinal differences between the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and hundreds of different Protestant denominations. But these differences in beliefs should not prevent us from joining together as members of the body of Christ. In fact, we can enrich each other with our different spiritual and religious insights.

In the World, Not of the World

The second idea that has helped me live my faith is the idea that we Christians should be *in* the world but not *of* the world. At the Last Supper, when Jesus prayed for his disciples, he said:

I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. (John 17: 14-15)

“The world” in this passage means the society or culture in which we live—the world of business, government, the military, schools, the media, and social institutions. “The world” is the material world, the secular, commercial world, not the world of God and faith.

Jesus was *in* the world. He walked among us. He ministered to us. He taught, and healed the sick, and fed the hungry. And he wanted his disciples to do the same. In his prayer, he said he did not want God to take his disciples out of the world—he just wanted God to protect them from the evil one.

As disciples of Jesus, we should be *in* the world, loving and helping others. As we minister to those in need, we will experience joy and sorrow, we will learn to forgive and be forgiven, and we will grow toward God.

However, while Jesus was *in* the world, he was not *of* the world, and he did not want us to be, either. As disciples of Jesus, we aren't defined by

the ways of the world. We don't have to have the same goals and lifestyles as the secular, commercial society that is all around us. We don't have to seek symbols of secular success like power, wealth, and fame. We don't have to be among the social elite. We don't have to live the way others expect us to live.

Jesus is not calling us to be "successful" in the worldly sense. He is calling us to follow Him. If we do, we will be blessed. We will be blessed whether we are "successful" or not.

God has given each of us certain talents and abilities. When we use the gifts he has given us, we have the opportunity to glorify him. If we use those gifts well, we may be "successful" in the eyes of the world. If so, that success is simply a by-product of seeking to do God's will. If we achieve power, wealth, or fame, we know that they are simply tools to be used in serving God. They are resources that we should use in loving and helping others. I have a slogan I made up about money, which is this: "There's nothing wrong with money that giving it away can't cure." There is joy in being a Christian who generates and channels resources that can be used to do God's work.

We should remember that Jesus didn't come to condemn the world, and we don't have to condemn it, either. The point is not to be *against* the world. The point is that our faith isn't *about* secular, commercial success or social prestige. Our faith is about loving God and following Christ.

The Message of Good Friday

That brings us to the third idea I would like to share, which is the message of Good Friday. When I was in high school, I really struggled with this. I didn't want to think about Good Friday— it was just too awful. Jesus was beaten and scourged, mocked, and forced to carry the cross. He suffered on the cross, and died on the cross. The world inflicted on Jesus all the cruelty and pain and hate it could inflict. It was just too terrible to think about.

But finally it occurred to me, as it has occurred to millions of Christians, that the story of Good Friday is not only about how the world treated Jesus. The story is also about how Jesus *responded* to the way he was treated. And his response was astonishing. It was breathtaking.

In the face of cruelty and pain and hate, Jesus loved people *anyway*. He forgave people *anyway*. And He saved people *anyway*.

What a powerful message! Even on the cross, suffering and dying, Jesus showed his love by connecting his mother with his disciple John. Even on the cross, suffering and dying, he saved one of the robbers who was crucified with him. Even on the cross, suffering and dying, he asked God's forgiveness for those who had crucified him.

The loving, forgiving spirit of Christ triumphed over all that the world did to him. The world couldn't change who he was and what he came to do. Good Friday was not a defeat—it was a major victory. On Good Friday, Jesus triumphed over *life*. Then, on Easter Sunday, he triumphed over *death*.

On Good Friday, Jesus demonstrated that our spiritual lives are not about how the world treats us. Our spiritual lives are about how we *respond* to the way the world treats us. If we respond the way Christ did, we will always find meaning and deep happiness. I believe that is what he wants for us. Christ wants *his* triumph on Good Friday to be *our* triumph, too. We, too, can triumph over life before we triumph over death.

Which Bible?

There is one more thing I would like to talk about, and that is about Bible translations. The good news is that the Bibles that are available to us today are more accurate, and closer to the original words of the biblical writers, than the Bibles that were available 50 years ago. Our bibles are more authoritative than ever before.

Why is this the case? It is the result of the discovery of thousands of manuscripts and centuries of intense scholarship. Hundreds of biblical scholars and translators have been involved in a massive effort to identify and then translate the most authoritative texts. It has been an exciting and complex detective story.

To be really accurate, when we refer to “the Bible,” we are really referring to the Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. Those were the original languages. Every Bible in any other language is a translation.

Some of the translations of the New Testament are better today than centuries ago because scholars have discovered more Greek texts from the first and second centuries A.D. that were *not* biblical manuscripts. These non-biblical texts have given scholars a better idea of how certain Greek words were used by everyday people during the time of the apostles. This has helped them understand what the biblical writers meant when they used certain words in the scriptures.

Scholars talk about two theories of translation. One is the theory of formal correspondence, which is an attempt to make the most direct, word-for-word translation that one can make. This gets the reader as close as possible to the original Hebrew or Greek text. The other theory is called dynamic equivalence, which is an attempt to convey the meaning to today's reader without worrying about the word order and vocabulary of the original text. Each of these approaches has advantages. The best advice is therefore to look at more than one translation when you are studying a specific passage in the Bible. Today, most English-speaking churches use the Revised Standard Version, the New American Standard Version, the New Revised Standard Version, or the popular NIV, the New International Version.

In short, there is more than one reputable method of translating the Bible, and therefore more than one reputable translation. Above all, we need to remember that we don't worship the Bible, we worship the God who is revealed through the Bible. The Bible is not God. The Bible is God's Holy Word. It is the revelation he wants to share with us.

So which Bible should you use? Use the one that helps you feel the presence of God. Use the one that speaks to you more directly than any another. Use the one that conveys a sense of the sacred, while drawing you into its message. Use the one through which you believe that God is revealing himself to you.

God knows that each of us is a little different. It does not surprise me that there is more than one reputable translation, more than one way for us to understand the Word of God. That simply gives God more than one way to speak to us, and more than one way for us to listen to him.

Well, those are some ideas that have really helped me live my faith. I would really appreciate your comments or questions, on anything I have said, or any other topic you would like to raise.

Thank you, and bless you!