

## 10 tips for greater faith...

If we want to see mountains move, cancers disappear and dollars come through the mail, we're going to need plenty of faith in God. Jesus put it like this: **If you believe you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer (Matthew 21:22)**

On another occasion, when the disciples' prayers hadn't worked, Jesus explained that it was: 'Because you have so little faith' (Matthew 17:20). Faith, it seems, is the fundamental ingredient of all effective prayer. How, then, are we to open our hands to receive more faith? Here are ten practical keys that have helped me:

**1. Prayer and Worship-** The key to Jesus' ministry was surely the many hours he spent in prayer, since, as he himself said, 'the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does' (John 5:19). It was undoubtedly as Jesus took time away from the crowds to refocus on the Father's presence and priorities, that he found fresh faith, insight and power. On one occasion he returned from his prayer time walking on water. After another he appointed his disciples. And in Gethsemane, as we have seen, he found the greatest faith of all.

It's natural to make requests to God and he invites us to do precisely this. But to grow in faith we must also give time, as we pray, to worship; consciously taking our eyes off ourselves and our long lists of problems, and fixing them instead on God. Faith grows by focusing on God's goodness and greatness instead of our problems. For this reason, it's a good idea to develop a rhythm in prayer; an easy ebb and flow between petition (asking God to do things) and thanksgiving (celebrating the things he has already done). No matter how many unanswered prayers we struggle with, there are always blessings too, for which we can be grateful and in which we can discern the faithfulness and goodness of God. The apostle Paul advises us to bring our 'shopping lists' before God with grateful hearts: 'In everything,' he says, 'By prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God' (Philippians 4:6).

In my relationship with Samie, it's when we stop talking about problems and practicalities and take time instead to celebrate one another's company with leisurely dinners, trips to the cinema, walks in the country and surprises too, that our relationship actually grows. In the same way, faith grows as we learn to relax in God's presence, taking our eyes off ourselves and celebrating his goodness in all things. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard puts it beautifully: 'Teach me, O God, not to torture myself, not to make a martyr out of myself through stifling reflection, but rather teach me to breathe deeply in faith.'

**2. Fellowship-** While personal prayer is vital to any deepening faith, there are certain aspects of God's character which can only be absorbed, explored and enjoyed by leaving the cloister and engaging in community. Theologian Richard Lovelace suggests that a person cannot be more filled with the Holy Spirit than their community is. The words and lives of godly people invariably prove contagious, and we come away from time in their presence feeling stronger in our convictions. They help us (as we help them) to become 'sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see' (Hebrews 11:1).

One of these people for me was an old lady who had now died called Pearl Lavers. She was always, it seemed, full of joy and hope in spite of all sorts of afflictions. On our wedding day the weather was terrible - it poured with rain - but Pearl came bounding up to me calling 'Isn't it wonderful! How marvellous to have rain. In scripture,' she smiled, without any hint of irony, 'rain is always a sign of the Lord's favour, and for you he's made it bucket down!'

People like Pearl are good for faith! Even if you don't have the benefit of such friends, you can still train yourself to speak and think positively rather than cynically and, by doing this, you can stir up a more expectant culture among your friends. You can also find inspiration in the many biographies of heroes of the faith, and by doing this we may keep fellowship with those who have gone before us.

**3. Fasting-** The discipline of fasting can focus our prayers in the way that a magnifying glass can focus sunlight to start a fire. If you're struggling to get a breakthrough in a particular area through prayer, it's well worth considering some form of bodily self-denial (this could mean going without food, sex, entertainment or other luxuries for a limited period. Daniel even fasted body lotion for three weeks!). In God's Chosen Fast (one of the best books on this important discipline) Arthur Wallis says: 'When exercised with a pure heart, and a right motive, fasting may provide us with a key to unlock doors where other keys have failed.

**4. Start Small-** If, right now, you haven't got the faith to walk into a hospital ward and pray for the sick, you might like to start with a prayer for your friend's headache. Try to pray at an appropriate level for the amount of faith God has given you right now. Start small and build up. Jesus said that we only need faith the size of a mustard seed! Elsewhere he is seen to be coaching the disciples in the supernatural (e.g., Mark 9:29, Luke 10:4, cf. Luke 22:36, also Matthew 15:29).

**5. Impulsiveness-** Sometimes God will give you a particular burst of faith for something and you should seize the moment to pray for that thing. It might be during worship, or some less obvious moment, but you suddenly have a conviction not only that God can do the thing but also that he will do it if you ask him. The New Testament is full of 'immediately's' and 'suddenly's'. There is often a sense of urgency and immediacy in the movements of the Spirit.

**6. Adventure-** Martin Luther defines faith as 'a living, daring confidence in God's grace'. We can afford to live with 'daring confidence' because God's grace covers our mistakes and blesses us unconditionally. Luther might have paraphrased Hebrews 11:6 to say: 'Without daring confidence it is impossible to please God.' I have often experienced the smile of God on the risks I have taken in his name. In fact, with hindsight I can see that the biggest blessings of my life have been the result, without exception, of taking some terrifying step of faith into the unknown. Perhaps this is why, of all Brennan Manning's writings, the quote to which I turn more frequently than any other, describes faith as a movement into uncertainty:

The way of trust is a movement into obscurity, into the undefined, into ambiguity, not into some pre-determined, clearly delineated plan for the future. The next step discloses itself only out of discernment of God acting in... the present moment. The reality of naked trust is the life of a pilgrim who leaves what is nailed down, obvious and secure, and walks into the unknown without any rational explanation to justify the decision or guarantee the future. Why? Because God has signalled the movement and offered his presence and his promise.

**7. Bible Study-** Whenever we are sure of God's will we can pray with absolute faith and confidence. Our guidebook is, of course, the Bible, through which God builds our faith by revealing to us both his promises and his person in Jesus.

God's will is not, I suspect, nearly as difficult to understand as we tend to assume. When we are befuddled by a situation, it is more likely to be because creation is infinitely complex or because Satan is deliberately confusing than because God is concealing his will. The Father has revealed his heart fully in Jesus, 'For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him' (Colossians 1:19). The apostle Paul says that 'God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been

clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse' (Romans 1:20).

**8. Pilgrimage-** One of the benefits of pilgrimage - whether it's to a special place of ancient or personal significance or to a context of renewal like an annual retreat or a particular conference - is that it can release faith and a new perspective on old situations. Faith is also easier in certain environments, a phenomenon that even seems to have affected Jesus who couldn't manage many miracles in his home town because of the unbelieving atmosphere (Mark 6:5).

**9. Journaling-** Maintaining a journal or a blog is not a helpful discipline for everyone. However, for some people, it is undoubtedly a useful way of recording God's work in the different seasons of their lives. My journals are covered in doodles, Bible studies, late-night depressive rants, terrible poetry, ticket stubs and, of course, lists: things to do before I die; music and books I want to buy; bizarre places I hope to visit; things God has said to me; the fixtures for Portsmouth Football Club. I am often reminded of God's faithfulness by returning to things I have journaled in the past. It was by making time to record experiences, insights, poems, frustrations, myths and stories over many generations, that the Bible got written.

**10. Listening to God-** The apostle Paul says that 'Faith comes from hearing' (Romans 10:17). It is vital, therefore, to learn to listen to God, turning our ears to hear his voice in order to grow in faith, proceeding with increasing confidence in his will.

Professor Dallas Willard shares a refreshingly practical method of listening out for God. 'Personally,' he says, 'I find it works best if, after I ask for God to speak to me... I devote the next hour or so to some kind of activity that neither engrosses my attention with other things nor allows me to be intensely focused on the matter in question. Housework, gardening, driving about on errands, or paying bills will do. I have learned not to worry about whether or not this is going to work. I know that it does not have to work but I am sure that it will work if God has something he really wants me to know or do. This is ultimately because I am sure of how great and good he is.

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