

# Lord, I Believe, but How Much Faith Does it Take?

## By Bingham Hunter

Bingham Hunter:

--Prayer. Their attacks such as the following from the Lord Jesus, Mark 11, "All things for which you pray and ask, believe that you will receive them and they shall be granted to you. "So we set our heart on a particular course of action which we want God to perform for us, or a particular object that we feel that He needs to give us, or we intercede for someone else. And we really get into it and believe with all of our heart, and what comes is absolutely nothing! And what we tend to do is to discredit the nature of God, maybe He hasn't got the power, or maybe He's not interested. Ask questions about whether the authors have accurately quoted Jesus, whether Jesus was right. And a lot of us get back to wondering whether we're praying right. Those three areas tend to be the major focus-foci for our concern over why God doesn't answer. I'm convinced that a profound problem which exists in the evangelical church today relates to understanding what prayer is.

Most people that I talk to think that prayer is a way to have God give you what you want. A way to have God give you what we want. I become convinced in reading the scripture that it works differently. That prayer is a means, not the only one, but a means which God uses to give us what He wants. And there is a radical difference in orientation to the whole prayer experience from those two points of view. As I told the people on Wednesday when we talked about God's sovereignty, over here, people get very, very concerned about techniques and about methodologies, and the mindset which is behind it is as if I want to learn how, as the tail I can wag the dog. And the other side over here is a completely different attitude. Most of us, because

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of our inadequacies and our shortcomings, have a tendency to think of the primary goal and the prayer experience as getting the answer. Am I right? Isn't that why people leave the faith, because God doesn't answer their prayers? Isn't that why we feel so frustrated? Because the heavens are brass? The problem is we don't get the answer.

I become convinced in studying God's Word, and thinking, and talking with and about this with other people, that we've got this thing wrong, that our preoccupation with the answer is part of a package which ultimately sees God as a kind of blessing dispensing machine, which is manipulated by prayer of a certain type, of a certain fervor, over a certain long period of time, and is juiced up especially well if we fast or get four or five others to pray with us.

Fundamentally mechanical understanding of things. Father is a gift dispenser. Let me give you an idea that will shift some of the categories for you if you take it seriously. From God's point of view, His ultimate concern is the quality and depth maturity of His relationship with you personally. Answers to prayer are simply part of the means which He employs to develop and strengthen relationship between you and He. If that's true, then what we have got is a fundamental misunderstanding of where the orientation ought to be. We are all focused on the answer, are we not? And we conclude that God doesn't love us when there is no answer.

But in point of fact, what I'm saying here is that frequently we learn more about God's love through this struggle, which we go through, by not having an answer, and are forced to grow and mature in our understanding and dependency upon Him. Now I wanted you to know that upfront because I think it's going to make a fundamental difference in how you relate to the rest of the material that I present here. But if you are primarily answer orientated, if you measure the

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effectiveness of your prayer life by what you're batting average is, then it is likely that you have shifted into a mechanical understanding of what the prayer process is, and you have reduced God to a machine. You are probably overly concerned with techniques and methodologies, with being on praying ground, with having the right motives, with being an adequate, receptor of God's blessing, and so forth. And that's the traditional evangelical approach to it all. My suggestion is that what you need to focus on is your relationship with God. You need to ask, what does God want to do in my life? What is He saying to me? And in what way does His answer or His non-answer, if the answer is no or wait a while, facilitate growth in my personal spiritual life?

You see, God is interested in you! And the material stuff that He gives us, as answers to prayer, are very fleeting, from His point of view. For us, it's desperately important, but we need to let Him set the agenda. God's priority is in people, as I told you earlier in the week, in the real you, not your image, but in the real you. And so He is much more concerned with seeing growth take place in His relationship with you and seeing you become more conscious of your dependency upon Him, of His love for you, than He is in simply giving us things. And if you keep that in mind, it may help a little bit in reflecting on the rest of what I have to say. Prayer is not then the way we get from God what we want. It's a means which God uses to give us what He wants. Priority then has got to be placed on God's will. And secondly, God is more concerned about the relationship that we have with Him than He is about the individual answers. The answers are a means to growth in the relationship, and non-answers maybe equally means the growth in that relationship. Because they foster understanding of what it means to be His child.

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Well, let's go back and do a little biblical study together. I've got scriptures on three by five cards so that I can save time, although we'll go back to the book occasionally. I'm glad you brought your Bibles with you. This whole thing begins in Hebrews 11:6, "Without faith, it is impossible to please God. For whoever would draw near to Him must believe that He exists and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." Most of you are here at Biola because you're convinced God exists, or at least your parents were convinced that you should be convinced that God exists.

[Audience laughs]

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Most of the faculty across the university, and administrators, and staff are convinced that God exists, at least up here somewhere, or as part of the implications of the fact that they believe the Bible and accept it as authoritative truth. But on a day to day basis, I find an awful lot of evangelical Christians, including me, are in a great deal of danger of falling into a trap which is described both in and out of the church as practical Atheism. I'd like you to ask yourself as you reflect on what's going to happen to you next week, in exactly what space in your life is it necessary for God to intervene in order for you to get through the week? Now, the answer to that question in my life, on many days, is this. Because my life is so structured, and so regulated, so ensured, that there isn't any space for God to do anything. What I'm saying is that it would continue on roughly the way that it is now, even if there wasn't any God. And you see, that's one of the pressures that comes to people who live in modern, urbanized societies, because the whole structure of our life, we're driven more by the watch that we have on our wrist than we are by any consciousness of the existence of God.

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Where do you have to be dependent on God? What is at risk in your life that the presence or absence of God in reality would matter? A great many of us are so regulated, so structured, so risk free, that it simply doesn't matter. And I'm convinced that's probably true for a lot of us right here at Biola university. There's an intellectual commitment to the existence of God, but there is no space in the day to day affairs of life for it to matter whether there was one or not. We get so busy doing what we think He has called us to do, that there's no time to even depend upon Him or reflect upon the need for His existence. Watch it. This isn't just a theoretical idea, this is not the sort of thing they pay theologians to talk about. There is a real problem in many, many of our lives, and the fact that we have nothing at risk where God has an opportunity to work. We all understand the need for God when there's a disaster, when we find out that we have cancer, when you learn your dad's got a heart condition, your mother's broken her leg, or whatever it is, when the business fails, when the budget falls short at the university, oh, there's a need for a God!

But when it goes very well, and you're healthy, and business is prospering, and you're living the abundant American life, where's our space for God? Hebrews 11:6, which is where it all starts, is fairly heavy stuff, if you understand the nature of commitment rather than just intellectual ascent. Let's talk about what faith is, let's think about it in biblical terms. The first five minutes of this are fairly academic, I don't apologize for it because we need to be careful in how we think through this. First of all, the faith that Jesus talks about, which is essential, being effective in prayer, believes in God's omnipotent creative power. Believes in God's omnipotent creative power. The statement is made in Hebrews 11:3, "By faith we understand that the universe was made God's powerful word." Abraham is used by Paul in Romans 4 as an example, which proves this point. He says, quote, in verse 20, "No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of

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God, but he grew strong in his faith, fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised."

The attitude has got to be that of Jeremiah in chapter 32, where the prophet says, "Is anything too hard for Him?" Expecting the answer no. And it may be for some of you that the complete isolation of your life from the need for God has led to a considerable diminishment in your appreciation for how powerful He is. And maybe that you're not praying to the God who made heaven and earth, and upon whom our whole existence depends. It may be that you are praying to a wimp. And it makes no sense to pray to a wimp, because he can't answer your petition. So first of all, we must understand faith as fully committed, both intellectually and personally, to the reality of God's omnipotent power. Secondly, we must also be certain of God's willingness to help, at what the author to the verse there in Hebrews 11:6 referred to as the fact that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. James puts it this way in chapter one verse five, "God gives generously to all men." A ruffed, free translation of that is He's not a nitpicker. Jesus gets at it in Matthew seven, when He says, "If you, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask Him?"

He goes on to use the illustrations of the child who asks for a piece of bread and is given a rock. It's a flat thing, like a loaf of pita bread. Looks like bread, but when you go to bite it, it breaks your teeth. Person who asks for a fish, probably the most common protein source in Palestine, in the area where Jesus ministered. A scaly object, which is used for food, and you hand it over and what is it? A snake bites your hand. The word is used as a poisonous, damaging, destructive thing. What Jesus is saying is God is not twisted. And it's incredibly important that you

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remember this because on days when you don't receive the answer that you figure God should give you, what we invariably do is doubt either His power to deliver, or His benevolence, His goodness, His willingness, His kindness. And that's why Jesus says if you can see that fathers are committed to their children, even though human mothers and fathers have sinned in their hearts, how much more you should understand that your Heavenly Father is totally committed to doing what is best for you. He will never act towards you in a way which is not completely and totally loving.

The world is full of the loving kindness of the Lord, as it says in Psalm 145. He loves and He cares, and He will do what is best. The second component then of the kind of faith Jesus talks about is a commitment, firm conviction, that God is willing to help. That He always acts in a way which is best. And then finally, thirdly, the component which is so often left out in modern evangelical thinking about faith, is that we must understand faith in God as being the God who is revealed to us in the Scripture. This is the authoritative source from God Himself, His self-revelation on what He is like. And it is impossible to divorce the notions of His power and His goodness from what He has revealed about Himself in the Scripture. The Apostle Paul talked about the problem of the supposes for people who don't have special information about God. In Acts 17, he talks about people in Athens who go to pray, and to offer sacrifice at the altar of the unknown God. Such people have to sort of get a petitionary shotgun together and blast up into the sky and hope that they come close to something that God might respond to.

And Paul says, look, I want to explain to you what He is like, so you know how to respond to Him and have a relationship with Him. And he goes on to say, in Romans 10, a verse which we

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always use in evangelistic context, to say the same thing, "How are men to call upon Him in whom they have not believed?" Now, the Hebrew idiom for prayer in the Old Testament is "call upon the name of Yahweh," Jehovah. So "call upon Him," here, is an expression about prayer. How are you going to call, pray to God, unless you have faith in Him? And how are they to believe or have faith in Him of whom they have not heard? The author is saying there, to pray you must have faith, and to have faith, you must have content and understanding what God is like. And it is there were so many of us go off the rails and how so many believers are manipulated. Because we have separated the notion of acceptance of what God has revealed about Himself in scripture from the process of Christian prayer. Thirdly, then, the faith we're talking about is tied to a willingness to accept the picture of God that revealed, that is revealed by reading His Word.

The implication there is obvious. If you want to pray effectively, you must make the reading and study of God's Word a priority in your personal life. To go on with this third point, faith must be understood in terms of what God has revealed about Himself in scripture. It cannot be pressed to mean that through Christian prayer, simply because God is omnipotent, anything can happen. Faith does not give us a blank check which has no limits, which can be cast by anything, for anything, because Jesus signed it at the bottom. So-called possibility praying then is often very close to fantasy. Most of you will have been taught at some point in your life, that in the prayer time you spend with God, you should use God's Word as a basis for finding promises, which you have then been assured He will respond to if you have claimed them correctly. It's a common practice which has undone the faith of a great many people. It's undone the faith of an awful lot

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of people because we've not been told honestly about the context in which the promises occurred.

Over and over, I've listened to teachers say the basis of Matthew 7,8,9, chapter 7, "Ask--seek not," then you will get some profound Greek exegesis that will tell you the verbs are present tense and imply an ongoing continuous action, and you'll be told to persist! And you'll be given the promise that the one who asks, and seeks, and knocks will get. And so on occasion, you have poured your heart out, and you haven't gotten a thing. And you say why? The answer often is that we have ignored the context. Matthew 7 is at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. The material which occurs in Matthew 5, 6, and 7 is the most concentrated teaching on the demands of committed discipleship anywhere in God's word. What Jesus is saying in Matthew 7, is that those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, who are committed to being peacemakers, and who are committed as best they can with the help of the Spirit of God to live as citizens of Jesus' kingdom, as He explains it in those chapters, are the sorts of people who desire what their heavenly Father desires. And when they asks it, He dumps it on them. But it's not a blank, unconditional promise that whatever you ask for, you will receive. You cannot rip it out of its context without radically twisting what Jesus says.

Over and over again, a verse, a phrase from a verse, is ripped out of its context in scripture and promises are applied that have no business, in application at that point in an individual's life.

How to think about the promises then is an important issue. I would want to give you two basic principles here. First of all, faith must be absolute that God will act if He specifically and unconditionally promised to do so. Now, though-no-note what I've said there, if He has

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specifically and unconditionally promised to do so. There are two such obvious examples of this type. One is the prayer in James 1:9 for wisdom, the other is in First John 1:9 regarding forgiveness. If you're willing to confess, which assumes repentance, the Father is faithful and righteous, and will forgive. And John goes on to verses later to explain that the forgiveness of God is certain because the basis of that forgiveness is the meritorious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, First John chapter two, verses one and two. If you doubt, after taking a sin to the Father, asking that He forgive you, you are either slandering the character of God, His faithfulness and His righteousness, or you are doubting the power of the blood of Christ to remove your sin.

Therefore, for a Christian to go around with extensive guilt feelings after coming to God and asking that guilt be taken away through confession of sin, on the basis of the blood of Christ, constitutes a slur on God's character, or the valuing of the blood of Christ. There's a statement in James, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously without reproach," not a nitpicker. "And it will be given." He goes on to say, "But let him ask in faith, not doubting. He who doubts is like a wave which is driven around on the sea." That person must not suppose he'll receive anything from God. He describes him as a double-minded man, unstable. The point there is that to fail to believe what God is specifically and unconditionally promised, there are no conditions that are attached to that, is to slur the character of God. It is to doubt that He is generous. One thing you must notice when you pray this way, and if it's an hour and a half before Curtis Mitchell's exam, you may be using the verse wrongly. Is that the text doesn't say when God will give wisdom, and it doesn't say how.

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Most of us are looking for an instant solution. But the text doesn't imply that that will be the case. In fact, if you read a few verses down, the author more or less says that wisdom comes through experiencing adversity in life, through being beat on. What most Americans do when they pray this verse is to want to bypass the difficulty in hopes of making the right decisions so as never to be in a position where I have to acknowledge that I'm dependent upon God and can't help myself. Faith has to be confident, secondly, that God will act in wisdom. When the promise that you have is not specific, when it's not unconditional, and when your request may seem to be consistent with God's will, but you don't have this kind of specific, unconditional support. It's in this area that the Christian must be willing to say, "Not my will, but Thine be done," because it's not obvious that it is the will of God in cases like this. I use this as a jumping off point to talk about something which is tremendously important. It is for this reason that James says in chapter 4, you ought not to say that I'm going to go out and establish a business and once that business prospers, I'm going to make a whole lot of money and I'm going to start doing that tomorrow.

He says, "You ought to say 'if God wills.'" It is for this reason, that the apostle Paul, whom we can't doubt was in fellowship with God during most of his ministry, says, "I have struggled in prayer for a long time, if at last, by the will of God, I might succeed in coming to you Romans." And He asks at the end of that letter in chapter 15 that they join him in praying for the same thing. But there's always the "if God wills" there. Because there is no specific promise in God's word, as James suggests, that starting a business in this town will necessarily prosper. Nor is there any promise in God's word, as the implication is found in Romans, that it's God's will for Paul to be in Rome at a certain point, which Paul thinks is the appropriate time. Paul recognizes his perspective on things is different than God's perspective. Most teaching today on naming it

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and claiming it, operates in areas that are not specific and unconditional relative to promises. They are not the same sort of thing as First John 1:9, or James 1:9 regarding wisdom.

They operate in this area where the Christian is committed to God acting in wisdom, and willing to accept what God gives. And you are given the impression that if you have sufficient faith, you can convince God, either by the strength of your faith or the purity of your motives, that you deserve a particular blessing. Now, it's rarely ever couched in these terms, but that's what it boils down to, that I am a worthy recipient of Your blessing. In such cases, it is absolutely important, vital, that you never express any doubt. This is usually based on James chapter one. Therefore, a person who names a particular blessing, often in association with a not specific, not unconditional promise, will nevertheless be asked never to give any expression of doubt, never to have any possibility that God would not answer. The entertaining of the possibility that God may not answer is usually regarded as a clear evidential sign as you don't have enough faith. I want you to turn with me to Daniel chapter 3. This is the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. You find it there just a little bit to the right of Ezekiel. If you get over to Hosea, you've gone too far.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, a couple of good Jewish boys who are in a fairly hot spot. Nebuchadnezzar has created an image and he has asked that everybody in the world bow down and worship him. The story as it's picked up here in verse 13, I'm reading from the NIV, "Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar subject-summons Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men were brought before the king and Nebuchadnezzar said to him, 'Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods nor worship the image that I have set

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up? Now, when you hear the sound of the horn, the flute, the zither, the lyre, the harp, the pipes, and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image which I have made, very good! But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. And what God will be able to rescue you out of my hand?" Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego respond to the King, "Oh Nebuchadnezzar, we don't need to defend ourself before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it. And He will rescue us out of your hand oh King. But even if He does not, we want you to know oh King that we will not bow down and serve your gods or worship the image of gold that you have set up."

Now there is no doubt through the course of Christian and Jewish history that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are presented as paragons of faith. As people who in the most dire circumstances were willing to risk their life for their commitment to the existence of God, commitment to His omnipotent power, and absolute confidence that He would act kindly and in faithfulness towards them. No doubt whatsoever. They say our God is able, we're not afraid of you. But there are no promises in this book anywhere, prior to Daniel historically, that say that commitment to God, a willingness to die for the sake of the Jehovah, will in any time guarantee your life. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego come from the same line of godly people as Daniel did, and people in that line were butchered by Nebuchadnezzar and by his armies when the city was destroyed, when they were taken into captivity. And they saw there firsthand that faithfulness to the Covenant does not necessarily guarantee long life, that God can't be manipulated by sacrifices, and even by the fervent prayers of His people when His will is different for them.

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And so they say, what? We got enough faith to ensure that we're gonna be delivered from the fiery furnace? Nuh-uh. You see, they are not committed to getting the answer. They're committed to God. What we're looking at here is a species of the difference between having faith in faith, I've got enough and it's adequate, I am qualified for God to give me the blessing, and having faith in God, which says I'm totally helpless in this situation and I'm willing to accept what You give me. That is the profound difference between most of name it claim it approaches to understanding faith in our day. This side says essentially, "Look at me, look at me! I have enough, give it to me!" This side says, "I'm helpless. I need You, I'll accept what You give me." The difference between having faith in faith, and having faith in God is quite profound. And I'm afraid it's largely the third point that I mentioned earlier, which has allowed many of us to be manipulated like this. It is the non-careful study of God's word, and the use of promises out of context, and the clear implication that if you have sufficient faith, you can manipulate God.

Brothers and sisters, I have listened to mature believers at dinner tables, I've sat there appalled, as one lady said to another, "I had enough faith to be healed. It's too bad you don't!" Some godly members in my faculty have family members who are not well, and they have received the same stuff. "Maybe someday, prof, you and your wife will have enough faith for her to get well!" Something in me just shrivels and dies when I hear that. If God did not deliver His Son from suffering, from pain, and from adversity, if He lived in abject poverty, having virtually nothing but the clothes on His back when He died, by what slight of hand do we figure that we are going to escape suffering, and persecution, and difficulty? Always enjoyed great health? Has our sin contributed to the pain and the hurt in the world? You better believe it! It's often our

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childishness, our desire to escape the consequences of our own action, our poor planning, and our sinfulness which have put us in this kind of a position. You see, when you have faith in faith and the answer comes, what happens is you feel yippee! And people look at you and they say, "Oh, what a faithful person."

And then you begin to look at the ones who haven't had enough faith, and you begin to feel just a little bit better than they are, a little taller than they are, a little more superior than they are. And they look at you and they begin to feel, "Why didn't God bless me? I was as faithful as they were!" And what happens in this side of the house is a separation between the people of God, between those who have been blessed and have become celebrities! They never interview people on the 700 Club who didn't get their prayers answered. It's always the celebrities who did. And it creates a tremendous sense of guilt on the part of the rest of the body of Christ. Now, look, none of us are committed to God enough. I'm not talking about having no faith, I'm talking about the arrogance which comes from feeling that the reason the blessing comes from heaven is you! Or two, or three, or four, or six, or the whole prayer chain of you. The reasons blessing come have to do with the sovereignty of our loving God and His perception of what's best for us.

Over here on this side, some people get healed and some people don't. Those who get healed are conscious of the fact that they've not earned the right to be healed, and they recognize that if God has given them health, they have an obligation to go out and serve, and support, and to encourage those whom God in His sovereignty has not chosen to heal and to make well. A businessman whose business prospers is aware of his responsibility to ru-to the brother who is now in chapter 11. On this side, there is a consciousness of our need as a body to support and encourage one

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another, and an overwhelming thankfulness to God for what He has done. Sure, you're going to struggle with some envy. Sure, you're going to say, "Why not me, or the person that I love?" But you're able to sink unashamedly into the arms of God and encouragement of your brothers and sisters, and you don't have this tension, this guilt, which is so much a part of commitment to faith in faith. It's very different faith in God as opposed to having faith and faith.

Think with me about another illustration. There is a place in Germany, as there is on the Pacific Coast, where people stand there holding these things made out of high-tech resins, and pieces of fabric, and jump off the edge of cliffs. They're called hang gliders. Now, what do you think matters most when you get ready to jump off the cliff? Is it your pilot's skill? Is that the kind of outfit you're wearing? Is it the experience that you have? Well, if that wing spar is broken, if it's cracked, if somehow there's a rip in that rip-stop nylon, and the one part of the wing comes off, it doesn't matter how much pilot skill you have, it doesn't matter how much experience you have, the net result of stepping off the cliff is going to be disaster! What matters when you jump off the cliff, first and foremost, is the strength and the quality of the construction of the craft. Now think with me for a minute, can you fly from this life through death into eternal life on the strength of your faith? At the very point where the necessity of faith is the greatest way you enter into the unknown of death, where people don't come back, your faith fails! It stops. And if it depended upon you, you would never get from death to life eternal.

The issue is not your faith. It is whether you have faith in one who can be trusted at the point when you can't trust anymore. You cannot fly from this life through death to eternal life on the strength of your faith. The issue is precisely as the apostle Paul said. He said, "I know in whom I

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have believed, and I'm persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed to Him, my whole self, my ministry, the whole work which God has called me until that day." And that's what I'm arguing here for. Watch out for the feeling that it's your faith that saves you. Brothers and sisters, when your faith ends, the issue is whether you have put it in the right object, whether the God you have trusted is trustable, is He all-powerful, are His promises true? What is great faith then? Well look at a couple of examples with me. Think about the Centurion in Matthew 8 that the Lord Jesus confronted. The man comes to the Savior, persisting for his servant who is ill. He says, "Will you come and heal him?" Jesus says, "Okay, let's go." And the man responds by saying, "Hey, look, I'm a man under authority. I understand how power corrupts. I can say to one fellow, 'go' and he goes. I can say to another 'come here,' he comes here. I'm not worthy to have you come into my house."

And it is with the admission of that humility that Jesus turns to the man and says, "I have not seen such great faith in all of Israel." Humility. The Canaanite or Cyro-Phoenician woman comes to Jesus in Matthew 15 asking that He would heal her little girl. Begging! She begs so much the disciples say, "Send her away, she's bugging us!" Finally she gets an audience with Christ and He says, "Woman, I wasn't sent here to take care of you people. I'm sent primarily to the Jewish people." And she says, "Oh Lord, but even the dogs get to sit under Jewish tables and eat the crumbs." And the Lord responds to her instantly by saying, "Woman, you have great faith." And her daughter was healed from that hour. Again, it is the expression of total dependency and humility to which the Lord Jesus personally attaches the notion of great faith. Now this having faith in faith perspective invariably gets it turned around. There's a lot of arrogance attached to this. What we're saying here is that when Christ used the comments, "Great faith," He is usually

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talking to a person who has expressed to Him, one, total dependency upon Him, the persistence expresses that, and, two, humbleness. I know I cannot manipulate you, I have nowhere else to go.

The disciples casting out demons is often shot back at me as it-as a confusion of the issue here. The disciples are sent out by Christ and they cast out demons during the early part of their ministry. And then they run across a young boy who is afflicted with epilepsy and also demonically possessed. And the father is ripped up inside and the disciples try to take the spirit out in some way. They can't do it. And finally, the man comes to Jesus and says, "These guys are wimps. I thought I'd come to You and see if You could help." And Jesus casts the spirit out, and there's a violent altercation, and the boy is freed. And then the fellows come to him afterwards and say, "Lord, why couldn't we do it?" This is the situation. They've been commissioned by Christ and given authority to cast out spirits in the name of Jesus. They come back to Christ after that session out there, exorcising spirits, and say, "Even the demons are subject to us in Your name." And you can just see the way that it was going on. Peter's standing there saying "Mmmm out!" Thomas standing there saying, "I don't know if this thing is going to work."

[Audience laughs]

Bingham Hunter:

John coming along and saying, "I've got it. Come out of him! Depart to the pit!" Over and over. And they ask the question, "Why couldn't WE do it?" And the Lord's response is, "This comes out by prayer." And some text said, "And fasting." The point that He makes is that you could never do it. It was My power. It was My authority all along, and you arrogantly thought that it was you! If you read the narrative, this story is reported in all three gospels, you will find that

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Jesus refers to them as a faithless group of men. They did not have faith in God, they became so arrogant as to think they themselves were able to do it. One final example before we wrap it up.

Turn with me to Genesis 32. Here you see a story which has been twisted by almost all expositors who teach on Christian prayer to say that you should wrestle with God, and if you wrestle long and strong enough, you'll be able to get an answer. The story here gives Jacob, all by himself. This is a man who has succeeded in life by conniving, by the strength of his wit, by the sharpness of his mind, and by some incredible supernatural intervention by God.

We're told in Genesis 32, "That night, Jacob got up and he sent his wives, and his maid servants, and his eleven sons, and took them across on the other side of the Jordan [unintelligible]. And after he sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. And so Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. And when the man saw he couldn't overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip, so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, 'Let me go.' And Jacob said, 'I won't let you go unless you bless me.' And the man said, 'What is your name?' 'Jacob,' he answered. The man said, 'Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.' Jacob said, 'Please tell me your name.' And he replied, 'Why do you ask my name?' And then he blessed him there. Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'It's because I've seen the face of God.'" Most prayer teachers will tell you that this is an occasion, and Jacob wrestled with God and had sufficient strength so as to be able to get God to say uncle and give him the blessing. And that sort of teaching is blasphemous.

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It is evident from the way Jacob responds to the situation that he knew he was wrestling with God. Otherwise, he would not say the name of this place is Peniel. It is evident that if this was God, as Bible teachers have taught in Orthodox circles from the beginning of early Jewish exegesis, that God restrained Himself throughout the whole match. God restrained Himself from beginning to end. Do you think that the maker of heaven and earth is short on power to beat a man like Jacob? God restrained Himself right from the beginning, and He restrained Himself all the way through. You see, Jacob is not wrestling with God as much as he's wrestling with his own sense of arrogance. That's why he asked the name, in order that he might boast that he had bested God. I want you to behold the picture of the man who has been blessed by God through this kind of arrogance, and see the finger of God reach out and touch him right here in the joint in his hip. This man is going out to confront his brother, who has 400 armed men. That's the first verse in chapter 33. He's a man who has survived by cunning, and by treachery, and by his mind. And he goes out to meet his brother like this.

This is the picture of the man who was so arrogant as to feel that he can wrestle with God. Did the nation get the message? Look at the last verse in the chapter, "The sun rose above him as he passed the Nile, and he was limping because of his hip. And therefore, to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon that is attached to the socket of the hip because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon." Wrestling with God is risky business, brothers and sisters. The point of this story is that the arrogant, self-sufficient, conniving schemer, to receive the blessing of God, had to be so humble that he was virtually defenseless. And although they did understand that the deliverance which God gave him from the hostility of his brother came only from a

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sovereign grace of God, not from the strength of his power, the man is wrestling with his arrogance. That's what God confronts him with in that thing.

I don't know what you're wrestling with today. I don't know what you have faith in. What sort of a god are you taking your prayer requests to? Is it some sort of testy, shriveled, wizened old prune with some sort of twisted understanding of what's best? Or is it the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth, the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who went to the cross and who died for you? Who is omnipotent and who is committed to what is best for you in your life? Who do you have faith in today? That's what the question boils down to largely. Is it the God of the Bible? Or God as you wish He was? Is it the God who wants to see you transformed into the image of His own Son? Or is it a God who will tolerate you staying a spiritual infant for the rest of your life? God loves you and I so much more than we'll ever know. He is so much more actively involved in responding to contingencies in our life that we never pray about, then we'll ever know. Please be careful as you think about coming to Him in prayer, that you're committed to Him, and that you come with the attitude of humbleness and dependency, which is what persistence means, that's what fasting means, that's what importunity means.

It means there is no one else I can go to but You! You must help. Don't have faith in your faith, you'll be set up for disaster. The devil loves that stuff, because you become arrogant. It drives the wedge between brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. Come to God in humble dependency. Let Him know that the issues you pray for are urgent, to you they make tremendous differences. Tell Him the promises of His word, which you're convinced are appropriate, but ultimately be willing to submit to His sovereignty. Well, in summary, then, faith is the confidence that God is

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willing and that He's able to help us, that He has the power, and that He's going to be benevolent when He answers our prayers. It's the certainty that He will always act in wisdom when we don't have specific, unconditional promises, and it's the absolute conviction that He will do what He says when He gives us specific, unconditional promises. What are you trusting God for right now? For next week? You've had your head filled with all kinds of incredible things during the course of the Torrey conference. Above all, in which God is glorified, as it says on the wall over there.

Are you going to go back to this sort of thing that was creating spiritual difficulties for you before the Torrey conference? What are you trusting God for next week that only He can do? And do you believe that God is really a Father who has shown Himself to be worthy of trust? All the talk about forgiveness, about healing, about communication, all of it will largely boil down to an interesting experience rather than a transforming experience, if you don't believe God is a Father who can be trusted. Let's pray. Father, we are like that man who came to Jesus and said, if you can, make my boy well. Jesus said all things are possible to him who has faith. We say today, as he did, Lord, I believe, help my unbelief. Thank you for dying for us, for loving us, for showing us through people like Jacob, Shadrack, Meshach, and Abednego that You care even when it hurts. Help us to be submissive and pliable in Your hands. Help us to love You enough to put a few things in our life at risk so that we can see You confirm in us that You're real and that You care. Lord, we believe, help our unbelief. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.