

“Keeping the Faith”

Hebrews 11:1-16

Series: Core Strengthening Week 2. I Believe

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January 8, 2023

The small white envelope arrived the end of September. The postmark revealed it just crossed the Atlantic all the way from Sweden. Inside was a letter from my father’s cousin Göte. On Christmas Eve I mentioned my dad’s Aunt Elin the artist. Göte is her son. Göte and his wife Brigitte graciously hosted my family and gave us a tour of our homeland in 1996. Now Göte shared another treasure with me. His letter explained how he finally documented our family history in Sweden going back to the early 1500s. Through pictures and texts he presented to me the story of our ancestors spanning nearly five centuries. It was all contained on a flash drive in the envelope.

Even if you’ve only casually poked around in your own genealogy, you can appreciate what a goldmine this is. Through one envelope I would be able to leap back to the 16th century. It was like receiving the keys to a time machine. Even more, it would help me know myself – who I am, where I came from, why I am here, what part I play in our history. I could not wait to read it.

There was only one problem: except for the letter the envelope was empty. The flash drive was missing. To my horror I discovered a hole in the corner of the envelope. All Göte’s years of research, our entire heritage, fell through that hole and was lost.

There is a treasure waiting for you. It goes back much farther than the 16th century. It includes millions more than the names on the branches in my family tree. Above all: this gift will help you know yourself – who you are, where you come from, why you are here, what part you play in history. It’s the Apostles’ Creed: 109 words which contain the core of our faith. Where did it come from? Why the Apostles of course – it’s their Creed. According to legend, before the twelve Apostles separated to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth they met to make sure they preached the same message. So, inspired by the Holy Spirit, they each contributed one of its twelve statements. In other words, it’s a creed created by committee. That’s a myth.

While it certainly summarizes the teachings of the Apostles, research reveals the Apostles’ Creed goes back to an early creed in Rome possibly in the 2nd century. The word “creed” comes from its first Latin word: *credo* which is “I believe.” It’s one of the few summaries of the Christian faith accepted by most branches of the Church. It covers most of our core beliefs: Who is God? Who is Jesus and what did He do? Who is the Holy Spirit and what does it mean to follow Jesus?

In the first centuries, a convert to Christianity memorized and recited the Creed just before receiving baptism. When a new believer declared, “I believe in God...” he or she left the pagan world with all its gods and entered the kingdom of God. Today a family might celebrate a baptism with a party. Back then, if you were baptized, you faced rejection by your family, persecution by your neighbors and even execution by your government. It was a radical statement and a dangerous stand. It was the end of the old life and the beginning of the new.

Why do we revisit the Apostles’ Creed today? Like the flash drive which fell through the hole, we are in danger of losing God’s gift of faith. Our challenge, in this age, is not persecution

for the faith but dilution of the faith and desertion from the faith. By dilution I mean people are mixing the Christian faith with political views, pop culture, personal opinions. By desertion I refer to those who are abandoning Christianity for other philosophies or religions, for agnosticism or atheism. They are not keeping the faith. Here are a few modern creeds.

I don't have a religion. I believe in a God. I don't know what it looks like but it's MY god. My own interpretation of the supernatural. Jennifer Aniston

I believe in one thing only, the power of human will. Joseph Stalin

I really am into crystals. I'm a real positive thinker. I believe in creative visualization. Victoria Beckham

My religion encompasses all religions. I believe in God, I believe in the universe. I believe you are god, I believe I am god; I believe the earth is god and the universe is god. We're all god. Ray Bradbury

I believe in the dollar. Everything I earn, I spend. Joan Crawford

I believe in the Golden Rule – The Man with the Gold...Rules. Mr. T

What do these creeds tell us? Humans are not abandoning faith. They still believe. Even a hardcore atheist like Joseph Stalin believes in something. We all have creeds. The real question is not "do you believe?" but "in what do you believe?" Faith is not blind, irrational or anti-scientific since all people believe in something. Faith is not only for old folks. The Barna research group found that Gen Z – those who were born 1997 to 2012 – are actually more spiritual than other adults. 61% of Gen Z said, "I believe there is a supernatural or spiritual side to life, but I don't believe any one faith system works for me."¹ That is 10% more than the average adult. So they are spiritual but not traditional in their faith.

Why are they turning away from God in the Apostles' Creed? There are several objections:

1. God is invisible and untouchable. I can't sense Him so it makes no sense to believe in Him.
2. Organized religion and institutions are outdated, hypocritical, guilty of horrific crimes and have no right to tell me what to do.
3. I am angry at God for the suffering in the world, the sins of my family, the stuff that happened to me.
4. I feel depressed, anxious, lonely and distant from God.

We could attempt to clear away each obstacle to faith. Yet it's more important to look at the one common theme beneath all these objections: it is easier to believe in me and the religion I make than to believe in God who is beyond my reach. I would rather be in control than let go and let God lead. Why should I believe in God?

¹ Barna Group, 2000 US adults collected October 21-31, 2022

God wants to give you a gift. Faith is not a theological proposition. It is not a scientific formula. It is not a philosophical proof. Faith is God's gift to you. Paul says it best

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. Ephesians 2:8-9

What is this gift? It is a Relationship with the living God, your Maker, the God who is Father, Son and Spirit. When I meet with a couple for pre-marital counseling I ask, "How did you meet and fall in love?" There's always a great story: "We met through a dating app," "We met when my car broke down." "We met in a snowstorm." "We met when she dumped her drink on me." Yesterday we celebrated the life of our dear sister in Christ Miriam Hopkinson. Miriam wanted to fix the deck on her house so she called in a handyman. Then she made the mistake of feeding him. And Scott the handyman never left her life. They were married at Woodside on October 17, 2015.

The gift of Faith is God proposing a relationship of love to you. This is not from ourselves, Paul says, it is a gift that comes solely, freely, graciously, undeservedly from God. You "have been saved" by this relationship. When we think of the word "saved" we often picture someone delivered from danger such as a child pulled from a burning building. It certainly means this. We are saved from eternal separation from God, saved from the destructive powers of this world, saved from our old enemies sin, death and the devil, saved so we may live in our Father's House forever. That is no small gift. Yesterday Scott and Miriam's sisters Marjorie and Judy and their family clung to that gift of salvation. So do the families of Emily, Gene, Kathy, Stephen, Diane, Betty, Dave, Ralph, Florence, Mildred, Paul, Tony, Betsy, Rich and the many more who died last year.

Yet that's not all. The word "save" is not just about the hereafter. It's also about the here and now. It's also about overcoming the troubles of this life. When Jesus heals physical illnesses and casts out spiritual demons the same word often appears. To save is to restore a person to health and wholeness, to rescue them from physical and spiritual burdens. This is also part of the gift of faith God gives. He wants to help us with our anxiety and addiction, our despair and depression, our illnesses in mind, body and spirit. The flash drive gift my Dad's cousin Göte gave me was supposed to help me learn about myself and my history. God's gift of faith frees you to discover yourself, to be yourself, to be the person He created you to be. This is why it is unwise to make up your own religion, your own god or believe only in yourself. Often we are the ones who got us into this trouble, our best thinking got us into this mess, and we are our own worst enemy. So if all I've got is me to get me out I'm in deep trouble. Thank God that God reaches out His hand in love and offers to pull me out of the mess I've made.

And where does He put me? On a solid Rock. The gift of faith is also a Foundation. This Thursday, thirteen years ago Haiti, the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere, was rocked by a massive earthquake. It hit near Port-au-Prince the capital city. Homes and businesses were reduced to rubble. Over a hundred thousand lives were lost. Many more were permanently injured. Unfortunately, due to their poverty, many homes were built with too much sand in the mortar mix and not enough steel rebar in the columns. That night, with aftershocks rolling through the ground, almost all the residents of the city and the surrounding countryside stayed outside, torn with grief and fear. They couldn't trust the foundations of their homes.

All relationships require trust to survive. Marriages, businesses, economies, governments are built on a foundation of trust. In the last three years everything we trust, the things we believe in, have been shaken and shattered. This is why there is so much hostility, mistrust, anxiety, addiction, depression and fear. We are not sure we can go back to trusting the foundations we built. What about God? Can we trust Him? Will He let us down too? When I reach out my hand in the dark will He be there to grab it? Perhaps you feel it's safer to trust in yourself, then you won't be disappointed if God lets you down. Perhaps you see belief as a "leap of faith" or "blind faith." You picture yourself stepping off a cliff and hoping someone will catch you.

In the Bible faith is not a leap and it's never "blind." The book of Hebrews says,

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. Hebrews 11:1-2

It does not define faith with "kinda" "sorta" "maybe." Faith gives us "confidence" and "assurance." It's a rock solid conviction. It's certain trust in a God who is trustworthy. The rest of chapter 11 takes us on a whirlwind tour of the Old Testament and points out all the great heroes and heroines of the faith. How could Noah build an enormous floating zoo in the middle of a landlocked desert under a cloudless sky? How could Abraham and Sarah pack up and walk off the edge of their map? How could they decorate a nursery when they should have been moving to the nursing home? They all trusted God even though many never lived to see the fulfillment of God's promises.

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. Hebrews 11:13, 16.

How did these heroes do it? Did they possess outstanding courage and unsinkable conviction? No. There was nothing mighty about them. It was their Almighty God that made the difference.

Before you put your faith in God, God puts His faith in you. Before you draw near to the Lord, the Lord draws near to you. The relationship does not start with us. It begins with God. This is why after the earthquake, when everything they'd built was shaken, the people of Haiti stood on the only solid Foundation. NPR reported,

For the Western hemisphere's poorest country, the earthquake that hit Haiti in January was an especially cruel blow. Despite this, it's hard to find a Haitian who doesn't profess a belief in a loving God.²

The same was true for Dan Woolley, a documentary maker who was trapped in a basement under tons of rubble. Unable to free himself he wrote a note to his wife and children,

² Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family* (Baker Books, 2017), pages. 193-194.

I was in a big accident. Don't be upset at God. He always provides for his children, even in hard times. I'm still praying that God will get me out. He may not, but He will always take care of ya.³

After 65 hours underground, thankfully, Dan was saved.

You don't need to take a leap of faith to meet God since God already took the leap of faith to save you. He leapt down from heaven and came searching for you in Jesus. There is no risk to place your life in God's hands since He took the greatest risk when He placed the life of His Son in our hands. We worry God will let us down when we reach out to him in our moment of need. When Jesus reached out his hand to us, we nailed it to the Cross. Yet He overcame even that obstacle when He rose from the grave. Nothing will stop Him from seeking and saving the lost. It's not hard to trust in a God who laid it all on the line for you. He invites you to enter a close, intimate relationship with the Creator of the Universe. Do you and I deserve such a relationship? No. But He gives it anyway to one and all. That is His gift.

Remember the missing flash drive from Göte? When I discovered the hole I immediately emailed him but did not hear back for weeks. Finally an email came from his daughter Beatrice. Just after he sent the letter, Göte entered the hospital. She was able to send me the pictures and documents by another way. Then she shared her father was in hospice. The week before Christmas Beatrice sent me a note that her father passed away on December 5th. This incredible treasure, his life's work, was his last great gift to me.

Jesus' life's work, His greatest treasure, is the gift of faith. He died giving it to you.

Please don't lose it.

³ Todd Wright, "Earthquake Survivor Calls iPhone a Life Saver," www.nbcmiami.com (1-19-2010).