

Having Faith When You See No Miracle

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Holy Spirit: God's Empowering Presence Series

Hebrew 11:32-40

This evening [morning], I'm going to continue in a series I've been doing on the Holy Spirit and supernatural Christianity. Last week, we took a look at one of the most remarkable statements that Jesus ever made in John 12:12 where he says that if we believe in him and in the work that he has been doing, we also would do His work. We discovered that Jesus in that text was specifically talking about miracles. Jesus makes one of the most audacious claims that he ever made when he says to us that if we believe, we will do as followers of Christ, miracles.

However, anyone who has lived the Christian life for more than 2 minutes knows that the Christian life is certainly not a life of unbroken miracles. And, in fact, very, very often as you pray, you feel like you believe and others around you look like they are believing, but you don't see any miracles at all.

Many of you know that I recently wrote a book titled "Empowered Evangelicals." If you want to know what this church believes about a variety of things, what Vineyard is all about, you will want to pick up that book. But in the book, I describe the 2-sided nature of the Christian experience using the illustration of ABC's Wide World of Sports.

How many of you remember ABC's Wide World of Sports where the announcer came on and said: Spanning the globe, bringing you the constant variety of sports – the thrill of victory. And then you would watch Sugar Ray Leonard, or some other great boxer like Muhammad Ali, take an opponent out in 7 seconds, hitting him about 46 times. Or you would see the US Hockey Team beating the Russians in the 1994 Olympics. You watch them not only celebrating, but also wrapping themselves in the American Flag. The people in the stands are waving the American Flag. The thrill of victory.

But you have to remember every week having that sinking feeling in your stomach because you knew what was coming next. ...And the agony of defeat. Then they showed film clips of that poor hapless guy somersault down the ski jump. I don't know if I have ever watched a graphics that better illustrated the agony of defeat than the one of that guy cartwheeling down the ski jump only to careen off the side of the jump.

It caused a visceral reaction because everyone of us could see ourselves doing exactly the same thing. I never identified with Sugar Ray Leonard, but I always identified with that poor guy running off the side of the ski jump.

This is the Christian life. It is the thrill and the agony. It is John 14:12, "If you believe in me the works I have been doing you also will do." It is not only John 14:12, it is also 1 Peter 1:6, "In this you greatly rejoice. Now for a little while you may have to suffer grief and all kinds of trials." Life in this world is the experience of trials in all their many beautiful colors.

I love that phrase: Though for a little while you may have to suffer trials of various kinds. As I have studied 1 Peter, the thing that I appreciate about the trials mentioned in the book of 1 Peter is the ordinariness of the trials mentioned. Just to give you a free little Bible reading tip, I think that 1 Peter was written at a time before the great outbreak of the persecution under the great Emperor Nero. Nero was the first of the emperors to really go after Christians – to feed them to lions, to burn them alive, and to hunt them down wherever they might be hiding.

But I think 1 Peter was written before the great outbreak of persecution. And the things you note about 1 Peter is that the agony of defeat that is referred to is of the most ordinary type. Peter mentions the trial of living with an unsaved spouse, being in close relationship with them but having no unity, no intimacy to the deepest part of your being. You know the Bible describes marriage as two people becoming one. Oneness in the Bible between a husband and a wife is never just a physical oneness. It is not just having intercourse and sleeping together. Oneness is communion at the level of our spirits. It is connecting at the deepest part of ourselves to the other person's deepest part.

I continually talk with people who say: "Oh, I have this wonderful relationship with this other person. Although there is this one little problem, they don't share my faith.

Friend, that one little problem is an enormous problem. You cannot have complete oneness if you haven't connected with another person at the level of your spirit. If you don't share the same love for God, your bodies may join together, but you will always be disconnected inside. Single people, because God loves you so much, he wants you to have total oneness with another, if you get married. Don't settle for body-oneness by marrying outside God's faith.

Then Peter describes other kinds of trials. They, too, are very ordinary. They are things like being misunderstood at work, or having problems with the government, or having difficulties at church. Well, this morning, I'm going to do the second half of a message I started last week. Last week's message was about having faith enough to see a miracle. This week I'm going to talk about having faith when you see no miracle. Let's pray.

We are talking the bleak side of life this morning – the side you don't hear many testimonies about on Christian TV. On Christian TV, people are always praying for their lost 3-carat diamond ring and finding it. I'm talking about the other side of life – having your fiancée break your engagement; the side of life of losing your

job – maybe your manager has done some stupid things and you are swept along with the layoffs because your whole department is being changed; the side of life of competing athletically and losing – throwing the pitch that results in walking in the winning run, or missing the field goal in the last two seconds of the Superbowl, or being a running back like Ernest Bynar and fumbling the ball that prevents your team from winning the championship.

This morning we are going to talk about the side of life that includes not being healed, even though you are in a church that believes in healing. How do we relate to the agony of defeat, to the side that Peter describes with that little phrase: Though now for a little while you may have to suffer trials of various kinds. Why are so many people not healed even though they go to church, even though they are followers of Jesus?

Let me offer you a few biblical reasons why we see so many not healed. The first reason maybe so obvious that it may not occur to you. Many people are not healed because they don't ask to be healed. They don't ask for a miracle. A great portion of the church has this erroneous idea that it is somehow more spiritual to suffer with a problem and not bother God with it, than to ask God to free you from that problem. The notion that a person who is sick and just endures it without ever asking for prayer is somehow a better, more holy, more spiritual person than a person who comes up for prayer again and again.

This idea that there is spiritual merit in suffering quietly without asking for freedom and deliverance runs very far back in the church's history. We can trace this idea to a time when persecution stopped against the church and the time when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire during the reign of Constantine in the 4th century. Once Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire and persecution stopped, many church leaders began to apply the suffering passages in the Bible not to persecution and opposition, but to apply the suffering passages to sickness, not only to sickness, but they applied the passages to self-imposed suffering.

This idea grew that there was somehow spiritual value in suffering, so why not suffer more by doing terrible things to your body. In the early medieval church, you can read many stories of monks who would go out into the desert wearing shirts that had nails in them. They would wear woolen shirts that were uncomfortable. Some of them would climb up on flagpoles and sit there all night for weeks in the rain and cold. Many of them got sick, but they deliberately deprived their bodies of help.

Let me be as perfectly clear as I can be. There is no spiritual merit in suffering with a problem and not asking God for help. Whether we are talking about a confused super-spirituality, or the American independent spirit of "I can make it on my own without any help from God or anyone," there is no spiritual value in not crying out to God.

Why are many people not healed? James 4 puts it very clearly. You have not because you ask not. God loves people to ask him for help. See, we were made incomplete, we were made to be dependent, we need help. Therefore, it is an act of worship, an act of honor to God, to allow God the joy of meeting your need. Do you know that you worship God when you allow him to meet one of your needs?

There was a man named Jabez, with who I'm sure you are all familiar in 1 Chronicles. I hardly need to mention the story, although for a couple of people I will mention it. In 1 Chronicles 4, Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother named him Jabez saying: I gave birth to him in pain. Jabez's whole life was characterized by the name that he had. He lived, in a sense, under the curse of pain.

I have seen people who through their whole lives have one horrible disaster after another. They lose a parent, they have an incurable disease, they lose a child, they lose a job. They go from one terrible thing to another. Have you ever met anyone like that? That was the life of Jabez.

But rather than say: "I will try to escape my circumstances on my own without any outside help, or it is more spiritual for me to live this way than it is to call out to God," it says: "Jabez called out to the God of Israel: 'Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my territory. Let your hand be with me and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain.'" And God granted his request. Some versions say: "And God heard him for his godly request."

Friend, it is totally acceptable to ask God to bless you, to ask God to bless your family, to ask God to keep you from pain, to enlarge your territory, to expand your influence, to have his hand on your life. Ask. In contrast, God tells us in Reverse 3:17 that he hates it when we say that we are rich and do not need anything. We have not because we ask not. And we have not in asking because we do not believe.

I am not going to take much time with this. I covered this point last week. Remember that God has designed life so that he works in relationship with people to do miracles in this world. God has chosen to release the kingdom through our faith. You are a release point for the kingdom of God. Your prayers, your faith release the kingdom in your little circle of influence. God has chosen not to work around you, without you, over you, or under you. Rather, God has chosen to work through you.

We don't get it. We don't understand that we must participate in the process of bringing the kingdom. We complain often that God is not doing anything, and we haven't seen miracles when the problem really is not on God's side, but on our side. We haven't been releasing the kingdom by prayer and by faith.

Do you know, sometimes I think we are like a pitcher on the pitcher's mound, who hold onto the ball and refuses to throw it. The catcher is signaling, showing us what type of pitch he wants us to throw. He is dropping his fingers, waving his hands, but we just hold onto the ball. Then, we are upset because the ball is not in the catcher's glove. Why didn't the catcher get up, walk to the mound, and take the ball from us? Why doesn't the ball get there automatically on its own?

But the way the universe is set up is that God requires us to throw the ball. We have a role to play. We must ask and we must ask believing. Do you ever notice that Jesus in healing people constantly calls forth their participation in their healing as he turns to folks and says: What do you want me to do for you? What do you want? Speak up, man. Pray to me.

Parenthetically, people have asked me from time to time: You know, Rich, sometimes it sounds as if you are making a demand on God when you say: Come Holy Spirit. Why do you sound so stern at times? Frankly, I am not at all in my heart trying to be strong with God or to make demands on God, as if God must jump through my little hoop. If I unpacked what I was really getting at, instead with all of the accompanying words, what I would be saying is: Friend, those of you who are receiving prayer today, stop being so doggone passive. Why even your body language and the way you stand with your hands in your pockets with this sort of "whatever" attitude tells God that it really doesn't matter one way or the other because you are not willing to throw the ball when you get prayer.

Jesus is asking you what do you want? Be specific. What do you want? Go after it, friend. Receive the Holy Spirit. Open yourself up to God's activity. Take a bit of a risk. We must believe. We must go after the kingdom, and those praying for you must go after the kingdom on your behalf. Matthew 11:12 tells us that the kingdom of God is forcefully advancing and that it takes forceful men and women to lay hold of it.

But frankly, not only do we not ask, and do we do not believe, but the "not yet" of the kingdom of God continually confronts us. The not yet of the kingdom that continually communicates to us that even if we've got everything together on our side, even if we check off the dots, and even if we really believe, we still might not see a miracle. I have described the not yet of the kingdom in this series several times. I've used the illustration of standing on a big suspension bridge between two giant towers. That is where we are right now. We are standing on a bridge between two giant towers.

We look behind us and one giant tower represents the first coming of Christ. In his first coming, Christ paid the price for our sins. He opened the way for us to come to God and to be saved. All we need to believe is that Christ's death paid

the bill that we ran up with God. We rest on his death. We trust in it and we will be saved.

In his first coming, Christ took a piece of heaven, and like a running back, he put it under his arm and carried it into this world. A little piece of heaven, a little piece of heaven's healing, a piece of heaven's gifts, a piece of emotional healing, a piece of physical healing. He took a piece of what we are going to get in heaven, and he put a part of it under his arm and carried it into the world and announced that the kingdom of heaven was at hand.

Standing on the bridge, we look ahead and see another tower – the tower of the second coming of Christ. We still must wait for the kingdom of this world to be turned into the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ. We still have to wait for Jesus to return and for everything to work out justly, for our resurrection bodies. The kingdom of God is so confusing to us because it is like a picket fence. It is there and then it isn't; and then it is there again, and then it isn't. You say: God, why do you sometimes come? This is the peculiar nature of the kingdom. God is not always working miracles, then he is, then he is not again. There is this "already" and this "not yet." There is this thrill and this agony.

If God never came, if God never worked a miracle, we could build a whole theology that says God never shows up. But he does. And then he doesn't.

About a year ago I was in England and saw God come in the most extraordinary way I think I have ever seen God come. We were in a large meeting of about 2000 people in a hall. I had just finished teaching and the other guy and I were ministering up front to the assembly. The presence of God could be felt. The Holy Spirit came and people all over the hall were being healed. I had this very vivid impression that God wanted to heal long-term depression and he wanted me to speak to the depression over many, many people and break the bondage of it from them.

At this moment I said: I break the yoke of depression that rests on so many of you. And then I called it out, there was a snap, a pop in the room. You could hear it, it sounded like a crack, almost like lightening. And all the lights blew except one floodlight coming from the top of the auditorium. I felt this power go out of my body and there was this boom! And everyone sat there silent and then this cheer rose up. The kingdom came.

You say, "Do it again!"

Now I may never see that again for the rest of my life because I can't do it again unless he does it. And so it is with healings. I can go around this church and tell you some of the people that I have laid hands on who were instantly physically healed. And then there are many more times when I have placed my hands on someone and nothing happened. And those of you who have prayed for 100s of

people probably have the same testimony. Sometimes you've seen something and sometimes you haven't/

If you want an example of the "not yet," all you have to do is look at John Wimber, the president of the Association of Vineyard Churches of which we are a part. John is internationally known for his healing ministry. Many, many people report that they have been healed through John's prayers. Yet, he himself has been told every year from the time that he was 23 that he was going to die soon. He is now 62. He has had one physical problem after another his whole adult life. He has had heart problems, and he suffered a massive heart attack several years ago. He got over that and got cancer. He got over that and had a stroke. He got over that and had hearing loss. His son got cancer. How do you explain it?

There is a "not yet" in the kingdom of God. There is no scientific formula for getting a miracle. We are not baking a cake, just add these ingredients, ask, believe, and you will always be healed, because sometimes God comes and sometimes he doesn't.

Now, in looking at this two-sided nature of the kingdom, the thrill and the agony, I want you to flip over with me for a moment to Hebrews 11 because we see in Hebrews 11 people who had faith and the people who had faith when they saw no miracle. Hebrews 11:32-39:

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of the 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. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by 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 even in caves and holes in the ground. They were all commended for their faith, yet none of the received what had been promised.

Don't you just want to cut verse 35 off in the middle? It says that all these great things were happening and "women received back their dead, raised to life again." We want to stop there. Why go on anymore? The verse goes on and says, "Others were tortured and refused to be released. Still others were put to the sword." We want the thrill of victory, but the agony of defeat we want to cut out. We continually want to cut verses in the Bible in half and say, "I like this part; I am going to put this part on my refrigerator."

Philippians 1:29 says, "It has been granted to you not only to believe in him..." That is where we want to stop. The Christian life means to believe in Christ, but Philippians 1:29 goes on and says, "...it has been granted to you not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for his sake." How many of us have that on our refrigerators?

So many biblical verses we want to cut in half. The apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 1:11-12 says, "Of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher..." and many of us go, "Oh me, me! I want to be a herald. I want to be an apostle! I want to be a teacher. I want to bring the gospel!" But verse 11 runs into verse 12 and verse 12 of 2 Timothy says, "...and therefore I am suffering."

The coinage of the kingdom does not only have a heads but a tails. Some heroes of the faith overcome and win great battles, and some heroes of the faith are carried off from the battlefield dead. For every Peter who is freed from prison, there is a James who dies in prison, and both of them are heroes of faith. David who won great victories is a hero of faith, and Jonathan, his best friend, who was decapitated and hung on a wall was also a hero of faith. Understand you can be a hero and not get the miracle you are asking for. Do you understand that God can commend you for your prayers and reward you big time in the bank account waiting for you in heaven – even though it seems like God hasn't taken notice of you at all. Heroes in the Bible aren't only those who won in their life. Some heroes look like losers.

I want to make one more comment about heroes of faith, at least the ones who win so that we understand what faith is all about. Look at the people the writer of Hebrews mentions as people who were able to overcome, who were the great victors, who conquered kingdoms and administered justice, and shut the mouths of lions. He mentions Gideon, Barak, Sampson and Jephtha. We are talking about faith that begets miracles. You know what I love about the four winners who are mentioned? There have never been four more ordinary men in all the world than these four men, who are called "heroes of faith" – Gideon, Barak, Sampson and Jephtha. Go back and read their stories in the book of Judges because we disqualify ourselves from the company of people who will see the miraculous. We say, "I'm not good enough." Read their stories. See what kind of extraordinary results can come from such ordinary people who just believe a little bit. Just dare to believe a little bit!

Gideon. Judges 6. The Midianites have overrun the land. Gideon is hiding. He is sneaking out at night to eat a little bit of barley. He runs back in the cave and an angel comes to this fearful, timid guy who is among the poorest of the poor in the whole country. An angel greets him and says, "Hail thou Gideon. Thou man of valor." And Gideon's reaction is so great. Me? Excuse me? Is someone standing behind me? Who are you addressing? You want me to do something extraordinary? Everything about the story of Gideon and God using someone

who is so fearful and so double-minded and so little is amazing. If you think that you don't have enough belief, neither did Gideon! But God is so great.

Then what should we make of Barak, who won't go to battle unless a woman comes with him, and he can get shored up. What about Samson who, his whole life struggled with sexual bondage? Was any man more unworthy than Samson? You say, "I am an addict." Yes, God knows that, and he wants you to break free, but I tell you even now, God can use you as he did Samson without in any way approving of your sin. With just a little bit of faith, God can release a miracle.

And Jephtha? Has there ever been a person more unfamiliar in the faith? Someone who knows less? Jephtha was one of these guys that was just a hardened street guy, the son of a prostitute. He was an absolute nobody from nowhere. God used him.

Do you understand that the stories of the Bible heroes are mainly about ordinary people? We put all of these heroes in the category of great saints – men of ever-increasing faith, people unlike us. The book of James tells us to encourage us to pray for the sick and believe for healing that even Elijah was one of the two or three greatest miracle workers in the whole Old Testament, and the book of James says he was a man just like us. He prayed, and he saw great things happen.

If I could get just this church, those of you who are listening to me, to believe that God could use someone like you, little ordinary you, to release the kingdom, there would be no stopping this church in terms of its influence in the community. We would have thousands of people taking risks, talking with people in the grocery, praying for co-workers, getting words for people in McDonalds. Thousands of people every week taking several risks a piece to pray and reach out and ask God for great things. And the kingdom would come.

You say "Well, sometimes the kingdom doesn't come." And I say, "But sometimes it does, and sometimes it doesn't."

What we see in Hebrews 11:35 is a different kind of hero. Heroes of faith are not just people who see miracles, heroes of faith are people who don't see anything, who experience very little, and yet keep believing. Verse 35 says, "Women received back their dead, raised to life again..." Those are folks in the Old Testament like the Shunamite widow, a wealthy woman who had everything in life except a son. She asked God for a son, and God granted her request. Then when the boy dies, he sends Elisha the prophet to raise him from the dead. I love the story of the Shunamite woman in 2 Kings 4 because it tells me that no matter how well off you are, no matter how successful you are in life, you probably have a point of pain. Perhaps you can't have a child, or something is wrong with your marriage, and God knows your point of pain. Whereas some women receive back their dead, raised to life again, we read of other heroes of

faith who were tortured and who were refused to be released so that they might gain a better resurrection. In terms of talking about a better resurrection, the author is saying some are not only resuscitated, some, by faith have come back to live in this world – to live in their mortal bodies – but refuse to renounce the faith because they are looking forward to a better resurrection, a raising from the dead in immortal bodies. The author says that some were tortured, and some faced jeers and floggings, while others were chained and put in prison.

They were stoned. Jewish tradition says that Jeremiah was stoned to death. There were sawed in two. Jewish tradition says that Isaiah the prophet was sawn in two with a wooden sword. They were put to death by the sword. So we see that in verse 34, while some heroes of the faith escaped the edge of the sword, others were put to death by the sword, like the apostle Paul who likely had his head cut off in Rome as one of the martyrs under Nero.

I wonder sometimes about the church today and whether we have any idea of the history of the Christian faith and what it costs people to allow this message to continue for 2000 years. The price paid in martyrs' blood so that we can sit here continuing to hear about Jesus Christ. Do you have any idea what it cost people? The heroes of faith had to live with the "not yet" of God's kingdom and yet not give up.

The book of Macabees, which is in the Apocrypha but in fact is historically accurate in many of its details, the book of Macabees tells of a mother who lost seven of her sons to martyrdom because they refused to renounce the Jewish faith. Certainly, in our own tradition, the early church is replete with accounts of martyrs who despite enormous opposition refused to renounce their allegiance to Jesus Christ.

One particularly stirring story makes me cry every time I read it. A woman named Perpetua was a young woman, who after her marriage, came to faith in Christ. She is dragged off into prison along with many other Christians. They are putting these Christians to death. Her family comes and pleads with her to renounce her faith in Christ, if only by pretense, so that she can be saved and delivered from the lion's mouth. But she keeps refusing. Then her elderly father pleads with her and says, "For my sake, I love you so much, please..." And she says, "You are breaking me heart, but I can't. How can I renounce him who died for me?" And in the last episode of this account, her elderly father brings in her baby, whom she is still nursing and he says, "If not for me, if not for your father, then for your baby?" And she says, "I can't." She breaks down in tears and says "I can't." And she has to entrust her baby to a kind and gracious God and she is martyred.

Do you have any idea at all of the history of the Christian faith and the price that people paid so that this message could be preached so that you could believe? We so much want to believe that heroes of faith are only those who see miracles.

We so much want to break Hebrews 11 at verse 35 and say, "No, let's forget about the other side of the coin." We love the fact that it has been granted to us to believe, but to suffer for his sake? Heroes are sometimes carried off the battlefield dead, unknown soldiers who don't get to be on TV.

Friends, let me ask you something. What message did you come into faith on? In the early days of your faith, what were you told you were signing up for? As a Christian pastor, I want to ask your forgiveness, on behalf of pastors in this country, for pretending to you that you could somehow come to faith on the brass club plan, and later on, if you wished, sign up for the gold club plan. What message did you come to faith hearing? Did the message include the notion that you were yielding control of your whole life to Christ and that you might suffer for his sake? Was it a message that said you might sometimes not see a miracle yet you still had to keep believing? If it wasn't that message, you weren't told the whole story.

I am convinced that many of us don't understand Christianity at all. We continue to have a foxhole mentality where our goal is to keep our heads down and not to be shot. We think that we can live good Christian lives and that none of us are going to be carried off the battle fields. We spend so much time strategizing about how we can limit difficulty. I am not saying that you or I should ever go out of our way looking for trouble, but is it any wonder that Christianity has so little influence in our country when so few of us are willing to pay any price?

Several years ago, I was asked to speak to a group of faculty at OSU on how one can advance professionally and maintain the esteem of one's colleagues and still have an open witness to Christ. What makes you think you can?

Let's start really basically okay? Let's talk. What price, what inconvenience, what money will you take out of your pocket and inconvenience yourself, or what will you sacrifice because you are a Christian? What message did you sign up for? Will you open up your home to a small group and inconvenience yourself to have to clean? Will you inconvenience yourself to take a meal over to someone who has just gotten out of the hospital or who just had a baby? Will you suffer the embarrassment of having people know that you are a Christian and have identifiably Christian views of life? Will you sacrifice enough to tithe?

I am afraid, several erroneous views I must shoot down as I teach on healing, the supernatural and the coming of the Spirit. The erroneous view held among many Christians is that because we are children of God, we are all going to be protected from pain and suffering, especially we who believe in and who have seen the hand of God. We will not all be protected from pain and suffering. Some heroes win big in this life, and some will get their reward in the next. Didn't Jesus say that the last will be first and the first will be last?

Also the erroneous view is held that one can live an open Christian life and never get shot at. We wish we weren't in a war. Friends, this country is dominated by a spirit and an attitude that is absolutely opposed to Christians who want to live devotedly, consistently, and with integrity unto their Lord. At some point, you who are Christian will be faced with opposition by a spirit that dominates your environment. If you are working in a hospital setting, you are going to see practices and developments that are absolutely hostile to the Christian faith. In the hospital, they may be pressing forward with abortions. They may be pressing forward with New Age techniques. They may be pressing forward with the kinds of therapies that offend your Christian faith and your loyalties to Christ. What will you do about it? Will you stand up and be counted?

You may find yourself in opposition to something that is going on in the classroom because of what your teacher or professor or your advisor is doing or the philosophy that is coming out or the mind-set that dominates your department. You will find yourself, because you are a Christian, in opposition to the business practice of the firm you are working for, or the approach in your child's school, or what is popular in the world of entertainment, or what is popular in the lives of your children's friends.

Do you understand that to be a Christian is to live at cross purposes with the surrounding culture? To be a Christian means to have a gigantic wooden cross placed between you and the world around you. You, if you are a follower of Christ, are on the other side of the cross. While you may try to pretend that that cross doesn't exist, things are so different between you and the other people. The cross does exist, and things really are different.

Can you be a hero of faith even if your marriage is less than great? Can you be a hero of faith even if your eyesight is lost, or you get cancer, or your back is never healed? Can you be a hero of faith even when you are struggling romantically or financially?

What kind of faith is it that continues when we don't see miracles? The faith of these other kinds of heroes is a faith that first of all, realizes that suffering is part and parcel of life in this fallen world. We live in the "not yet" of the kingdom. Some of the picket fence is not yet filled in. Sometimes we see the kingdom, but sometimes we don't, and we have to wait. Faith accepts that.

Faith also accepts that suffering and sacrifice are part and parcel of being a Christian. I am not just talking about illness. I am talking about the opposition you will receive if you stand up and let yourself be counted. I am talking about the inconveniences of actually practicing Christian community. I am talking about the inconvenience of giving some of your money and opening up your home and opening up your life to another. Faith accepts that suffering and sacrifice and inconvenience are all part of being a Christian.

And faith accepts that life is different than God. Friends, your life may currently be horrible, but God is not horrible. God is very good. A recent situation may be very disappointing, but your God will never disappoint you. He is the God of all hope and all comfort. Your life may be a confusing mess, but your God is not confused. He remains in control. He is the only wise God who is sovereign and to whom you can still present all your needs and all your wounds. And God says to you that if you do not find the miracle at this time, at this moment, believe that the miracle may still come tomorrow, or next month or next year or next world. Heroes of faith don't always see miracles. Let's pray.