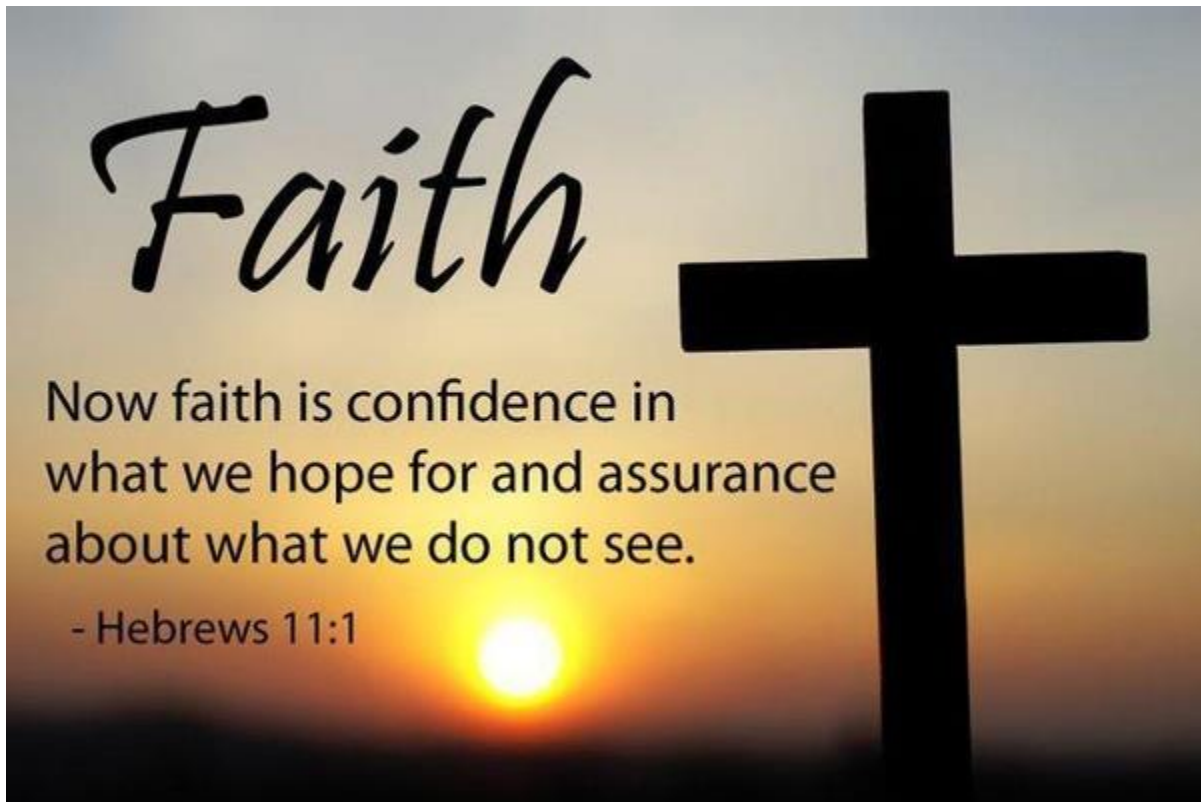


Sermon, August 7, 2022
Genesis 15:1-6; Hebrews 11:1-3, 11-16
“Deeper: Faith”
Rev. Dr. Brian Jones, Senior Pastor



The problem we have with most legendary characters is we don't know where the truth ends and the legend begins. Take someone like Davey Crockett. He had a lot of amazing accomplishments in his life. But he also had no problem embellishing those stories as a way to promote himself. This many years later, it's virtually impossible to see where the truth ends and the legend begins. Of course if we go back thousands of years, it becomes even more difficult. But sometimes we find the truth is just as fascinating as the legend.

Take, for instance, Milo of Croton, who lived well over 500 years before the birth of Christ. Milo was one of the best athletes of his day. I shudder to think how much money he would make in TV deals, movies, endorsements.

Milo was a wrestler. He was a six time Olympic champion. He won his first title as a boy, and then five adult titles thereafter. 7 crowns at the Pythian games (one again as a boy). He won the Preidoniks which is

a grand slam of sorts given to the winner of four festivals in the same cycle. His highest level of competition years lasted 24 years by experts' estimation.

But it doesn't stop there. Milo was a military leader, a warrior who led Croton in battle against neighboring Sybarites. My favorite part of this is apparently Milo wore his Olympic crown into battle, draped in a lion skin and using a club to resemble Hercules. Can you imagine that coming over the hill to fight you?

But this, then, is where legend and truth begin to blur. He did some feats of strength I believe are possible, he could hold a pomegranate in his hand and dare people to pry his hand off. They couldn't, but when he let go the pomegranate was undamaged. I can believe that one. The claim he could put a leather strap around the top of his head, and by tightening up, he could break it is a little harder to believe. Supposedly, he could stand on an oiled discus and then dare people to push him off, they could not.

The two most famous legends of Milo are one, in how he died. Supposedly, he attempted on a dare to show his strength by pulling a tree a part. He could, and he got his arm stuck where later he was found by wild, hungry animals. You can draw your own conclusion.

But my favorite legend is one I really want to be true. I'm told it's probably not, but I like it, and in some cases, it seems logical. The story goes like this. The secret to Milo's strength was in his training. As a young man, he found a young male calf. It was small enough that he could get under it and then pick it up on his shoulders. Milo reasoned that if he did this every day as the calf grew into a Bull, he would be able to pick up a full grown bull weighing thousands of pounds. I mean there is a certain logic to it. The calf grows in weight slowly and so does Milo's strength.

It's probably not true if for nothing else at some point the bull is going to have something to say about the entire arrangement. But I thought about that story of strength and resistance in preparation for our message today as we continue our theme of Deep. We've mentioned that we can become complacent in our faith at a shallow level. It's still belief and faith, but it's not deep. Jesus calls us to go deeper in our faith in order for our faith to become stronger. And how does our faith grow strong? Much like everything else in life, by resistance.

Nowhere do we see this than in our prayer life, indeed as we contemplate the purpose of prayer. If we had a recording device and we would be able to record all of your prayers within a week or two and show them to everyone, what conclusion would people come to about what you think the purpose of prayer is? If we just ask what is the purpose of prayer, we tend to get all sorts of really good, pious answers. But I'm actually more interested in what your life reveals about what you believe the purpose of prayer is.

Well, the purpose of prayer is to get what we ask for. That seems pretty easy, we pray and ask God for things, and we hope we get the right answers. The purpose of prayer is so that I can connect with God. The purpose of prayer is to remind me of the needs that other people have around me.

As I look at my prayer life and at what Scriptures teach us about prayer, I've begun to realize that these things, while not bad, are more the byproducts of prayer. But not its purpose. The purpose of prayer isn't to get you what you ask for. It's not to make you more aware of others. The purpose of prayer is to strengthen your faith. It's like the calf that grows and we lift it, and as we do, our faith become stronger.

Look at our passage in Genesis. It's an incredible passage. God comes to Abram and says "From you there will be an entire nation of people, and from that nation, one will come who will bless the entire world." It's incredible. Abram argues *well, I don't see how that's going to happen. I have no children.* And God says "Don't worry about that, leave it to me." And Abram believes. It's wonderful.

But here is one small problem. It doesn't happen. God has given a promise, His word is good. But it doesn't happen, decades pass. Can you imagine? Night after night Abram and Sara in their tent pray *God when? We believe you, we want to believe you, but we have prayed. Thousands of nights in this tent praying, and you have not answered. Where is your promise?*

Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever prayed for something in your life or in someone else's life, and it feel as if the doors to heaven are shut. Feels as if your prayers are falling on deaf ears? Then you know what it was like for Abram and Sarai. God, why don't you answer?

But let's look at our other passage in Hebrews. This is the faith Hall of Fame chapter. The author of Hebrews touts the giants of faith. And guess who gets top billing? Abraham. Abraham, the man of faith who believes God and was blessed with Isaac. But what if God had simply given Abraham and Sarah a child nine months after that first promise? Abraham would not have had a very deep faith. Because it's easy to have faith when everything falls into place. But it provides a very shallow faith.

The deep faith that comes from the thousands of nights you pray and believe and hope and look for God to move. Because the purpose of prayer is to deepen our faith. Prayer is not about our getting what we want or what we think we deserve or for someone else. God can already do that. The purpose of prayer is to strengthen our faith. Prayer becomes like that calf that keeps growing, and we keep getting under it and lifting it. And as we do, our faith grows deeper and stronger until very little can stand in our way.

When we begin to understand this, we see that there is no such thing as a wasted prayer. You have never wasted a prayer in your life. You may pray for the wrong thing. You may pray in the wrong way, you may pray, and God's answer was no. You might pray, and the answer is *not yet*. Regardless, you have never wasted a prayer in your life. Because every time you pray, you lift that calf, your faith got stronger,

you were formed in the image of Christ. Why, to believe that a prayer that isn't instantly answered is wasted is to assume Jesus wasted his time in the Garden of Gethsemane. He agonized and prayed. The cup didn't pass. Was it wasted? No, was Jesus made strong? Yes.

My friends, don't give up. There are blessings we can only discover when God immediately answers a prayer. And there are some we only discover in the waiting, in the resistance, as we grow strong. But they are both blessings. Keep lifting that prayer. Amen.