

The Ups and Downs of Faith

by Bayless Conley

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Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your Word. And we thank You for Your Holy Spirit. Spirit of the Lord, we recognize Your presence here among us and within us individually as believers. We are the temples of the Holy Spirit. We ask You to unveil and reveal the Word of God to our hearts today. Cause our eyes to see, the ears of our heart to hear. Give us comprehension, understanding in the Word. And it is our intention to not merely be good listeners, attentive listeners, but to be doers of the Word, to put Your Word into practice. And, Jesus, above all things, we pray You would be glorified. Amen.

If you have a Bible with you, please open to Luke's Gospel, the seventh chapter. We'll be spending the majority of our time there, in fact, almost all of it in Luke, the seventh chapter. I want to talk to you about what I'm calling the ups and downs of faith.

We're going to begin with a really familiar story. I want to read from Luke 7:1–10. It says,

¹ Now when He concluded all His sayings in the hearing of the people, He entered Capernaum. ² And a certain centurion's servant, who was dear to him, was sick and ready to die. ³ So when he heard about Jesus, he sent elders of the Jews to Him, pleading with Him to come and heal his servant. ⁴ And when they came to Jesus, they begged Him earnestly, saying that the one for whom He should do this was deserving, ⁵ "for he loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue."

⁶ Then Jesus went with them. And when He was already not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to Him, saying to Him, "Lord, do not trouble Yourself, for I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof. ⁷ Therefore I did not even think myself worthy to come to You. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁸ For I also am a man placed under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

⁹ When Jesus heard these things, He marveled at him, and turned around and said to the crowd that followed Him, "I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!" ¹⁰ And those who were sent, returning to the house, found the servant well who had been sick.

Do you know, in the Gospels, there were only two things that caused Jesus to marvel? One was faith. The other was unbelief. Now, if He's going to marvel at me, I don't want Him marveling at my unbelief. I want Him marveling at my faith.

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And it's interesting, the designation. Jesus said, this man, this Gentile, he had great faith. And there's only one other person in the Gospels that had great faith according to Jesus. And it was also a Gentile, a Syrophenician woman that had come to Christ on behalf of her daughter, who was severely demon-possessed. Great faith, we're going to talk about that.

Now, the centurion, he was an officer in the Roman army, over 100 men, basically equivalent to what we would understand as the rank of captain in the army in our culture. So, let's talk about this Gentile, this centurion that Jesus said had great faith, this man that Jesus marveled at.

In verse four, when the elders of the Jews came to Jesus, they earnestly begged Him that He should heal this guy's servant. They said because he's deserving. Literally, "Jesus, he deserves to have his request answered."

The Greek language is strong enough that it says he should be rewarded. Jesus, he has earned an answer to this request. He's earned it because of both his inward posture of heart and because of his outward actions. Inwardly and outwardly, he's earned it. Inwardly, his heart is in the right place. He loves our nation. He loves what God loves. He's not just some cog in the Roman machinery. Yes, he's part of an occupying force, but he's a good man. His heart is in the right place. He genuinely values us and loves us. And outwardly, he's got the works to match it. He has built us a synagogue. No doubt that would've made him unpopular with some of his fellow soldiers. It would've made him unpopular with some of his fellow Romans.

It would've been an extravagant expense on the salary of a centurion for him to have built that synagogue. "So, Jesus, look, this guy's heart is right inside and outside. He's done something extraordinary, so he should be rewarded. He deserves this. Inside and out. He's demonstrated his devotion to God and his love for us, so you need to do this for Him."

Now, the elders of the Jews believed that, and they declared it to Jesus. But did you know the centurion himself didn't believe that? Twice he said to Jesus, "I'm not worthy." They're saying, "Look, this guy is worthy. He deserves it," and he says, "Lord, I didn't consider myself worthy to come to You, and I don't consider myself worthy for You to even come under my roof."

I have spoken to many people throughout the years and had a particular conversation with them. There's one individual I'm thinking of right now that sort of is representative of the many conversations I've had. He came to me, and he was hostile. He was angry at the church, and he was bitter against God because of a tragedy that had happened to a friend of his and because God seemingly didn't answer their prayer. So he's angry with me, the preacher. He's angry at church in general. "I'm not coming back to church anymore." And he's bitter against God. And he basically told me the same things these elders, the Jews, told Jesus. He said, "Look, this guy was the best Christian I've ever known. He was generous. He loved what God loved. He was faithful at church, the purest heart I've ever seen, and he had the lifestyle to match it, and yet the tragedy still happened."

Now, the fact is, in those kinds of circumstances, none of us have all the answers. There's some stuff we won't know till we get to heaven, and I got a feeling it's not going to matter once we get there.

And the truth is Deuteronomy 29:29 says the secret things belong to the Lord. There are some things that God is just not going to divulge.

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There are some things you won't know. And you've got to be willing to live with that in this earthly life—living in this imperfect world, doing our best to follow Jesus Christ, and to put our trust in Him in every arena of life. But I do know that any time a person comes to God feeling like He's obligated to answer their prayer, "God, You owe me," because of either inward or outward goodness. It will always end in disappointment for that person.

What God does for us and the blessings He showers upon us, they come to us because of His grace. They're received by faith. The hand of faith reaches out and receives what the hand of God's grace freely provides. They are not merited by our inward or outward goodness.

Consider this. You'll know these verses. Ephesians 2:8–9 NIRV,

⁸ God's grace has saved you because of your faith in Christ. Your salvation doesn't come from anything you do. It is God's gift. ⁹ It is not based on anything you have done. No one can brag about earning it.

By grace you are saved through faith, not because of anything you've done. It's the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. And the word "saved," by grace you've been saved. It's the same Greek word translated "healed" throughout the New Testament. Same word. When Jesus healed people, same Greek word, by grace, you're healed. The word also is translated as "delivered." It means rescued. It encompasses the idea of forgiveness. All of those things are a part of God's grace, and it's by grace those things come to us through faith. Not because of our works, not because I'm inwardly good, and not because I'm outwardly doing the right things.

Here's another one, Romans 5:1–2,

¹ Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

"We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand."

Now, friend, everything God does for us comes via grace. Forgiveness; it's grace. Healing is grace. Guidance; it's a matter of God's grace. Peace—God's grace. Strength—it's God's grace. Wisdom—God's grace. Comfort—it's God's grace. Everything God does for us, it's grace. What gives us access into that grace? By faith, we have access into this grace in which we stand. It's not based on who we are inwardly or what we do outwardly. It's by grace through faith.

So this centurion, according to Jesus, had great faith. Not just faith, he had great faith. And as I look at his life, I see faith in three stages. Stage number one with this centurion, he believed Jesus was able. He believed that Jesus could cure disease. He believed Jesus was able to heal his servant.

It says in verse 3 when he heard about Jesus, he sent the elders of the Jews to see if He would come to heal his servant. Well, what did he hear? He obviously heard that Jesus had authority over disease. Probably some of the fellow servants were telling stories of what they'd seen and what they'd heard. Yes, the dead are raised. This Guy cleanses lepers. He opens blind eyes. He has the power to do this. So, he sends the elders of the Jews based solely on the fact that he knows Jesus is able. That is the beginning of faith.

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Friend, your situation may seem impossible, but what is impossible with men is possible with God. There's nothing too difficult for Him. He is able.

I was invited to go golfing with a wealthy businessman one time. And he took me to a very exclusive golf course. And he introduces me to two of his friends we're going to play with. And he pulls me to the side and says, "This one person," said, "they're retired. They're worth about 90 million." He says, "The other guy, he's worth way more." He said, "His company makes 80% of the slot machines in the world." I said, "Okay."

And we're going to play teams. So it's me and my business friend against these other two guys. And they're gambling on every hole. I said, "Okay. Look, I'll play. I'll play my best, but I'm out with the gambling. I, frankly, can't. Yeah, yeah, I'm out. I'm out." So we're playing, and it comes down . . . And you may not play golf, but just stay with me. Okay?

We're on the 18th hole. It comes down; I've got the final putt. I've got a downhill putt that's going to break about 10 inches, about an 8-foot-putt. If I sink the putt, we win it all. And so I'm standing over the putt, and Mr. Slot Machine, right before I'm ready to putt, says, "Bayless." Now, in case you don't know, that's really rude. You don't talk when somebody's about to putt. You certainly don't interrupt them like that.

I go, "What?" He says, "Do you know how much money the charitable arm of my organization could give your church?" I thought, "You dog." He's trying to get in my head, and he did. I missed the putt. You know what? He's worth hundreds of millions. I believed he could, but I didn't believe he would, and he never did. But I did believe that he had the ability.

Which brings us to the second stage of this centurion's faith; he believed that Jesus was willing. Number one, he believed Jesus was able. Number two, he believed Jesus was willing. When he sent the Jewish elders, he believed Jesus could, but when he sent his friends, he believed that Jesus would. Jesus is now not far from the house. There's a crowd with Him. The centurion would've been watching. All right. Here's this crowd. Jesus. All right, He's willing. Tell Him He doesn't need to come another step. Don't trouble Yourself. Just speak the word from there, and my servant will be healed in here. That's all I need to know. As soon as he saw that Jesus had arrived, he knew that Jesus was willing.

If Mr. Slot Machine had told me, "Bayless, the charitable arm of my organization, I could write you a check for \$20 million. What's your home address? I could have that check sent tomorrow." So I give him my home address. Do you know what I'm doing the next day? I got the curtains open, and I'm looking out the window. A big S-Class Mercedes drives up. I'll tell you what, I'm out the door. And say, "Look, don't trouble yourself. You don't even have to get out of the car. Just roll the window down. This hand of faith is going to reach in and receive what that hand of grace is providing. You don't need to get out of the car. You don't need to come in the house," because I suddenly realize he's not just able. I believe that, but now I realize that he's also willing. Those two things are foundational for faith. We must not believe just that God is willing but that He is able.

And I know some will say, "Well, yeah, but this centurion knew Jesus was willing because Jesus left where He was and came all the way to where this centurion was." All right, I'll give you that. But, you know, Jesus left the glories of heaven and came to this world for you. Jesus bore the stripes on His back for you. Jesus wore the crown of thorns for you. Jesus went to the cross for you. If that does not spell willing, I don't know what does.

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Romans 8:32, speaking of the Father.

³² He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?

So, number one, you have to believe the Lord is able. As difficult as your situation might be, as badly as you have screwed things up, you need to believe that God can. Secondly, you have to believe He is willing to help you. But there's a third stage, through the centurion's faith, that made it great. Number three, he relied on the evidence of Jesus' word alone. In verse seven, he said just say the word, and my servant will be healed.

Matthew, in his account of this story, puts it this way. He said, "The centurion said to Jesus, 'speak the word only, and my servant will be healed.'" I like that. Speak the word only. In other words, Your word is all I need, Jesus. I don't need a sign. I don't need to confer with my feelings. I don't need anyone else's opinion. I don't need to see my servant get better. I don't need to see an increase in his physical condition. Your word is all I need. Your word is enough. Great faith says I believe God is able. I'm convinced He is willing, and His word is all the evidence that I need.

I had a friend named Dave. Actually, Dave and his father, Gene, were both dear friends of mine. Dave's family has a ranch in Montana. And many years ago, he said, "Bayless, I want you to come and go elk hunting with me and my dad in the Bob Marshall Wilderness." Now, the Bob Marshall Wilderness is an area in Northwestern Montana that comprises 1.5 million acres, and it is as wild as it gets in North America.

There's no industry that goes on there. There are no roads in there. You're not even allowed by law to ride a bicycle in there. If you want to go in, you have to go in horseback, or you have to walk. And so he says, "Look, my dad and I will go in a day early. We'll take the horses in. And you fly into Kalispell. And then you go to such and such little hanger. There's a guy who's got a little two-seater plane. He'll fly you into the middle of the Bob Marshall, and he'll drop you off in a meadow. And I'll be waiting there with the horses. And then we'll go another 20 miles back to where my dad and I are planning on making camp along the flathead." I said, "Okay, I'm in."

So, I go to L.A., and it was so unusual. Los Angeles was fogged in. All the flights were delayed. So I sit in the airport. My flight didn't leave till, like, two, two and a half hours late. I get into Kalispell. I finally find the little hanger. And I find the guy and said, "Hey, I'm Bayless. I'm the guy you're supposed to take in the middle of the Bob." He says, "You're late." I said, "Yes, I know." He said, "You still want to go?" I said, "Yes, let's go." So we get in this little plane, and we fly just into the middle of this million-and-a-half-acre wilderness. We land in this meadow. And Dave's not there with the horses.

And so we're looking around. He goes, "He's not here." I said, "Well, I can see that." So he goes in the plane, pulls a handgun out from under the seat, fires it three times in the air, and we wait. There's no response. He said, "All right, get in." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, I'm taking you back." I said, "I'm not going back." He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "I'm staying." He said, "You can't stay here. He's not here."

I said, "Look, my friend gave me his word that he'd be here, and I'm supposed to meet him in the meadow. He wouldn't break his word. I'm staying." He said, "You can't. He's not here."

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I said, “Look, he told me to meet him here. I’m staying.” And he just said, “Look, California boy, you don’t seem to understand.” He said, “There is one grizzly bear for every square mile in this area. You can’t stay.” I said, “Look, I’m staying. Just go.” He said, “Look, there are packs of wolves that range in this very area where we’re standing right now. You can’t stay. I said, “Look, my friend gave me his word. Just go. Just go.”

I’ll never forget it. He looked at me and pointed his finger, and he says, “When you see my plane dip over the horizon and disappear, you are going to have the worst sinking feeling in your stomach.” I said, “Just go.” So I’m watching his plane disappear over the horizon. I didn’t have a sinking feeling. I was elated to get rid of him. I had an apple and a knife, and my sleeping bag. I’m golden. I managed to find a little bit of water. I ate my apple and then curled up in my sleeping bag and went to sleep.

About 2:00 AM, I heard something. It wasn’t a grizzly bear, wasn’t wolves, it was Dave and the horses. He goes, “Bayless, what happened?” I said, “Man, it got fogged in in L.A.” I said, “Where were you?” He says, “Well, I waited a few hours in the meadow,” he says, “so I rode down, I think, like 25 miles down this little trail to a little tiny ranger station, basically a shack, and I think the guy had a sat phone.” He said, “I got in touch with the pilot.” He says, “Man, I left that idiot up there.” He said, “You left him in the meadows?” He says, “Yes, he wouldn’t get on the plane.” So we had a good laugh. We hunkered down for the night and then, in the morning, rode about another 20 miles back into the wilderness and had a high time for the next week.

Now, my point in sharing this story, someone would say, “Why would you risk so much?” Well, because my friend gave me his word, and he wasn’t the kind of man that would break his word. I honestly didn’t think anything of it. Of course, I’m going to stay. He told me he’s going to meet me in that meadow. He’s going to be there. Now, if I’m willing to do that on the word of a friend, how much more weight should I put upon the word of my heavenly Father?

It is impossible for God to lie. Heaven and earth will pass away. His word will not pass away. The grass withers, the flower falls away, but the word of our Lord endures forever. His word should be all the evidence that we require.

Now, we’re going to move from a man who ascended into the realm of great faith to a man that descended to the realm of a faith crisis.

We’re staying in the same chapter in Luke 7. We’re going to look at John the Baptist, who, at this particular time, where we’re going to pick up the story, is sitting in a dark prison cell in Herod’s palace. Luke 7:19–22,

¹⁹ And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to Jesus, saying, “Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?”

²⁰ When the men had come to Him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to You, saying, ‘Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?’” ²¹ And that very hour He cured many of infirmities, afflictions, and evil spirits; and to many blind He gave sight.

²² Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the

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dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them. ²³ And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.”

Other translations say blessed is he that doesn't give up his faith, or blessed is he that doesn't stumble because of Me.

Now, this is quite a contrast to the Gentile, the centurion, who Jesus said he had great faith. Now we find John, the preacher, the prophet, in a crisis of faith. John had been there at the Jordan River when the heavens opened, and he had heard God's voice. God had previously spoken to John about Jesus. God had said to John, “the One upon whom you see the Spirit descend and remaining upon Him, this is the One that will baptize in the Holy Spirit.” John has already publicly testified that Jesus is the Messiah, that He's the Son of God. He has directed others to follow Jesus.

In fact, John was the flesh and blood cousin of Jesus. John's mother was Elizabeth. When Mary came to Elizabeth, when Mary's pregnant, Elizabeth is pregnant with John, Mary greets Elizabeth and the babe, John the Baptist, leapt in Elizabeth's womb at the greeting of Mary. Don't you know, he heard that story from the time he was a little kid. Even before he could speak, she's telling him that story. He knows. He's heard from God. He's experienced the supernatural. And yet, in the darkness of that prison cell, John begins to doubt, and he begins to question.

Unlike the centurion, who had none of the experience that John had, he had none of the knowledge that John had. Jesus said he had great faith. “All the evidence I need, Lord, is Your word.” Here we have John, the preacher, the prophet, visited by God, spoken to by God, the cousin of Jesus, saying, I need more. Can You give me a sign? How do I know You're the One?

So Jesus continues to heal, cast out demons, and preach to the poor. The same things He's done all along. Nothing new there at all. He basically tells him to tell John, “John, you don't need anything new. You're not going to get anything new. I'm doing the same things I've been doing all along. There's no more new information for you.”

Some of you sitting here, God's already spoken to you about your future, about your kids, about your health, about a situation. And you're in this dark place, and you're saying, “God, I need more. Can You give me a sign?” You may not get more. Listen, what God told you in the sunshine is now not suddenly untrue because the storm clouds rolled in. What God told you in a season of light is not suddenly untrue because you're in a season of darkness. No, what God said is true.

And I know there are some here; listen, I know this by the Spirit of God, in my time of prayer, I know there are people—God's already spoken to you. You've already had an encounter with Him. Maybe it was when you had the Word open on your knees, and suddenly something came alive to you, and you knew that God was speaking to you. Listen, if He said it was going to be okay, it's going to be okay. It doesn't matter what things look like right now. You don't need more than God has already given you.

Judson, he was the first American missionary to Burma 1830s. He got very little traction, worked and worked and worked. And then war broke out, and he was taken as a British spy; though he was American, he was thrown into a Burman, filthy prison for almost two years. He was tortured relentlessly. He was starved. And he's there. He's had a child born. His wife was pregnant when he was thrown into prison. He's never seen the child, hasn't seen his wife. He's lashed to a

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piece of bamboo. He has 32 pounds of chains around his ankles. And one of the other prisoners mockingly said, “Dr. Judson, what is the prospect of the conversion of the heathen now?” To which Judson immediately replied, “The prospects are as bright as the promises of God.”

It looked like everything had gone sideways. You talk about being in a dark place. Very little has happened, and now it's gone from bad to worse. And his heart said prospects are as bright as the promises of God. Eventually, his wife, through her tireless work, got him released from prison. And when Judson died in 1850, there were 100 churches in Burma, 8,000 converts. He had finished the translation of the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation in the Burmese language. To this day, 175 years later, it is still the most used translation in what today is called Myanmar.

Friend, it doesn't matter what things look like. It doesn't matter if things have gone south. Listen, just because the storm clouds and the darkness rolled in doesn't make what God told you untrue. Relax. You just relax. God can be trusted.

Now as well, Jesus said, go tell John. As well as doing the works, He said, “Tell John the blind see, the lame walk. Lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised. The poor have the gospel preached to them. Blessed is he who isn't offended, who doesn't stumble because of Me.”

Did you know that everything Jesus said for them to tell John was a direct quote of Scripture? You find it in Psalms 72. You find it in Isaiah 35. You find it in Isaiah 61. They were all promises and prophecies, direct, specific promises and prophecies about the coming Messiah. He said, “You go give John the word.”

And the point is this, in those dark times, friend, you need to get into the Word. You need to spend time with the promises. That's what will sustain you in the dark times. That's what will strengthen you in the dark times. That's what will keep you afloat in the dark times. John, you just need to go back to the prophecies and to the promises. I'm giving you the word.

Friend, have a love affair with your Bible. You may be going through a dark season. You will find strength in the Word of God. It will be a light to your pathway. It is food to your spirit. Spend time in the Word. Turn the TV off, put your phone in a drawer, you can live a few days without social media and soak in the promises of God. It'll change you. It'll help you.

And then a final thought here. I want to read a couple more verses. Luke 7:24–28 says,

²⁴ When the messengers of John had departed, He began to speak to the multitudes concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ²⁵ But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed those who are gorgeously appareled and live in luxury are in kings' courts. ²⁶ But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. ²⁷ This is he of whom it is written: ‘Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.’

²⁸ For I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”

There's another thought: to people, a single event may define you. A speech, a single heroic or a sacrificial act, or a single negative or bad thing that you do or that we do may fix us and define

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us in some people's thinking permanently, but not in the eyes of the Lord. With the Lord, it's the whole journey that defines us, not a single event.

So the disciples of John, they leave after they've come and expressed John's doubts, and John faltering there in the prison. The crowd's there. He says, look, let Me tell you about John. You want to hear about John? What a disappointment. I can't believe he faltered at this late stage of the race. I mean, he's My cousin, for goodness sake. He's fallen so short of his potential. He's fallen so short of My expectations. I'll tell you about John. I'm done with John. No, that's not what Jesus said. He said you want to know about John? He's no reed shaking in the wind. He was a man of conviction. He lived a sacrificial life. He's a prophet. He was great.

You see, it was the whole journey that defined John to the Lord, not one single failing while he was in prison.

Don't get stuck on a single achievement or on a single failure. The race is for a lifetime, and you have some more laps to run. God is not finished with you yet.

Listen, a righteous man falls seven times and gets up again. The Scripture says, do not rejoice over me, oh my enemy, when I fall, for I shall rise. Your story is not done. You have some more chapters to write yet. Stop wallowing in self-pity and shame. Confess your sin to the Lord. Get cleansed if that's what the issue is. Get up and do something. What counts is what you're going to do when you leave this place today. How are you going to live? What are the remaining chapters of your life going to say? And God's not judging you by what's going on right now. It's the whole journey, baby.

There was a couple that I met early on when I was saved, and they were unusually kind to me. I went to a little Pentecostal church, and I didn't look like them. I didn't sound like them. And most of the people avoided me, and I understood. Honestly, it's because they were afraid of me. There wasn't anybody that looked like me. I'd come out of an extreme substance abuse background, and I looked pretty wild. And most of the people wouldn't even speak to me. But there was a couple that actually went out of their way to show kindness to me. I am so thankful for that.

And I lost touch with them and then regained touch. And I knew that they'd started a church. And I found out I was going to be in the particular state they were in, right in the very region. So I got their number from someone, and I called and said, "Look, I'm going to be coming through. Can we have lunch?" They said, "Sure." So, I stop off at the restaurant, and there they are sitting at a table. We order. I said, "How's the church going?" The guy puts his head down and says, "We don't have the church anymore." I said, "Really? What happened?"

He said, "Bayless, I had an affair with a woman in the church." He said, "I can't believe I was so blind. It's like I had a bag over my head," and he started to cry. He said, "We gave the church up." And he began to cry so hard he excused himself from the table and went to the restroom. His wife is sitting there in silence. I looked at her, and she said, "Bayless, it's true. He had a fling with a woman in church, but he came clean, and he confessed it. He broke it off." She says, "We turned the church over to someone else, and we got counseling." She said, "It almost destroyed our marriage, but we made it, and we're stronger than we've ever been."

And she said, "Bayless, that was ten years ago, but he's stuck. God's forgiven him, I've forgiven him, but he can't forgive himself. He's let this one failing define him and define our lives." And

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then she started to cry. She said, "I don't know if you can, but if you can help him, please try." She said, "He's got a call to preach, but he's stuck ten years in the past. And this stupid thing he did, he's stuck, and it's killing him."

Friend, there are more laps for you to run. You may have screwed things up royally. You can still finish strong. You can still finish strong. Things change if you'll change. You can go another direction. You can do things another way. It's not one thing or maybe a series of things; that doesn't have to define your life. God's got some good things in store for you, my friend.

And you know, the journey with Him, it begins with giving our all to Jesus.

Now, many of you you've heard me share this story. I got saved in a street mission. I was the only one that responded that night. I had had some pretty serious problems with alcohol for a lot of years. I don't think I'd been sober for about four years at that time. And I had worse problems with illegal substances. And that night, when I came forward, I honestly didn't understand everything that was happening, but I did know I believed in Jesus. And I was willing if He could wipe the slate clean and give me another chance. I didn't know how it could ever happen. My life was tied up in so many knots. To me, it seemed impossible to untangle things. But I put it in His hands, and He untangled things for me.

A new journey for you starts when you say yes to Jesus. You haven't been so bad that He'd turn you away. He already died on the cross for your sins. He bore your sin. He bore your shame on Calvary. He did it in your place as your substitute. He was judged in your place, and God has already acquitted you, but it'll mean nothing to you; there's a full pardon waiting for you, but it will not be any advantage to you if you don't receive it. It'll do you no good.

The work has been done, but the way you receive that pardon is you say, Jesus, I put my trust in You, and I want You to be the Lord of my life; that means Boss, Savior. If you'll do that, He'll bring you into His family. He'll change you from the inside out, wipe that slate clean, give you a new pathway to walk, and He'll empower you to do it.

I want to pray with you in just a moment if you've never accepted Jesus, out on the plaza, wherever you're listening, in this auditorium. Secondly, if you're a prodigal, you know what I mean when I use that phrase. The prodigal son had it made in the father's house but left; temptation was too great for him. And he left and went into a far country, wasted everything he had. One day he woke up with a pig and thought, "What am I doing? I'm going to go back to my father's house and just ask if I can hire on as a servant." But, when the father saw him a long way off, he ran, embraced him, and kissed him.

Listen, the boy smelled foul. He had the smell of pig all over him. He was filthy, but the father hugged him, threw a party for him, and said, "My son who was dead is alive again." Some of you prodigals, you've been in a far country. You know what it's like, the joy and the mercy and the glory of the Father's house and relationship with Him, but for whatever reason, maybe you started hanging around with some of the old crowd, and it brought you back in.

Maybe, someone you looked up to messed up, and somehow that became a wedge between you and God. Someone that was a mentor to you screwed up and did something that, to this day, you haven't been able to get your mind around it, and that just somehow became a wedge that the devil used to drive between you and God. Or maybe just sinful choices on your part.

The Ups and Downs of Faith

But, for whatever reason, you're in that far country; I've got great news. The Father's not mad at you. Listen, He's not mad at you, but prodigal son, it's time to come home.

Prodigal daughter, it's time to come home. It's time to go all in for Jesus. Time is too short, eternity is too long, heaven's too real, and hell is too hot to be messing around, friend. You need to go all in for Jesus.

I want to extend an invitation to you. Just bow your heads, close your eyes, if you would. Outside as well, on the plaza. If sitting in this place right now, you'd say, "Pastor, I want my heart to be right with God. I don't want my mess-ups to be the defining factor of my life. I want to live strong for God, but I know I can't do it on my own." No, you can't. You need Him.

The Bible says if you believe in your heart God raised Jesus from the dead, and you confess Him with your mouth as Lord, that you'll be saved, you'll be rescued, you'll be redeemed. Now, God right now sees your heart. No other person in this place can see your heart, but He sees it. I want to lead you in a very simple prayer. All that I can do, however, is give you the words to the prayer.

I'm going to ask you to say them after me but not say them to me. I want you to say them after me, but tie your heart around them and speak the words to God. If you'll tie a sincere heart around these simple words, we're going to pray, and if you'll mean it and use them to talk to God right now, He'll hear your prayer, He'll wash you clean, He'll give you a fresh start. So, all across the auditorium, outside, or wherever you might be right now, maybe put a hand on your heart. Let's pray these words. Say,

Oh, God, I come to You. I believe that You love me so much that You sent Your own Son to die on the cross in my place. Jesus, thank You for loving me. Thank You for not forgetting me. Thank You for taking my place. I believe You died for my sins and that You were raised from the dead. And I ask You now, be my Lord, be my Savior. All I am and all I have I place in Your hands, Jesus. It's in Your name, I pray. Amen.

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