

Faith in General and in Detail

Martin Luther

John 4:46–54 · Church Postil (Lenker edition)

46 So Jesus came again into Cana of Galilee, where he made the water wine. And there was a certain nobleman, whose son was sick at Capernaum. 47 When he heard that Jesus was come out of Judaea into Galilee, he went unto him, and besought him that he would come down, and heal his son: for he was at the point of death. 48 Then said Jesus unto him, Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe. 49 The nobleman saith unto him, Sir, come down ere my child die. 50 Jesus saith unto him, Go thy way; thy son liveth. And the man believed the word that Jesus had spoken unto him, and he went his way. 51 And as he was now going down, his servants met him, and told him, saying, Thy son liveth. 52 Then enquired he of them the hour when he began to amend. And they said unto him, Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him. 53 So the father knew that it was at the same hour, in the which Jesus said unto him, Thy son liveth: and himself believed, and his whole house. 54 This is again the second miracle that Jesus did, when he was come out of Judaea into Galilee. John 4:46-54

[1] A beautiful example of faith is presented in this Gospel, exhibiting, as it does, the nature and character of faith, namely, that it is to increase and become perfect; and it portrays faith in a way as to show that it is not a quiet and idle, but a living, restless thing, that either retrogrades or advances, lives and moves; and where this does not occur, faith does not exist, but only a lifeless notion of the heart concerning God. For true, living faith, which the Holy Spirit pours into the heart, cannot be inactive. This I say for the purpose that no one may be sure, even if he has attained faith, that he now has everything; with this it shall not stop, for it is not sufficient to begin, but one must constantly grow and increase, and continue learning to know God better.

[2] For, on the other hand, it is not the nature and custom of our enemy, the devil, to be idle, as 1 Peter, 5:8 says: “Be sober, be watchful; your adversary, the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.” If then the devil neither sleeps nor rests, it is not right for a Christian to be idle and fold his hands; but he is to consider how he may fortify himself against the power of the devil; for he is not called the prince of this world in vain, John 14:30,

as today's Epistle teaches, Ephesians 6:12: "For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." This prince rules the world, howls and rages, is mad and foolish, cannot bear that a Christian progresses; nor is it to be wondered at, for thereby a rupture is made in his kingdom and his net broken. Hence, wherever possible, he hinders the growth and development of the Christian life.

[3] When, therefore, the fire of faith is kindled and burns, and the devil feels it and becomes aware of it, he immediately grasps it with all his cunning, for he knows how his kingdom is endangered by it. Therefore, he endeavors with great zeal to protect his kingdom, and exerts himself to retain all under his obedience. Certain it is, therefore, that, when a person begins to believe, temptation and persecution will be sure closely to follow him; and if this does not occur, it is a sign his faith is not true and he has not tightly apprehended the Gospel. For that rogue, the devil, has a sharp vision and easily becomes conscious of the presence of a true Christian. Therefore, he exerts himself to entrap him, and surrounds and attacks him on all sides; for he cannot bear that anyone should desert his kingdom.

[4] Therefore, it is dangerous to live heedlessly, for the devil is likely to take us by surprise. This happens even to the great ones among the saints, who rightly apprehend the Word of God. If they regard themselves as standing securely, this rogue is behind them, strikes them down and wrestles with them until they are vanquished. Behold, what happened to the great men of God, to Moses, to Aaron and to the princes of Judah. They had an excellent faith, when they led the people out of Egypt, and all the people went in faith through the Red Sea, through death, through the wilderness and through many other wonderful experiences, in which they manifested their faith; but at last they came to a point where everything was ruined; they feared that they would have to die of hunger and thirst in the parched wilderness. Is it not a pity that after manifesting their faith in so many great trials, going into and through death, wrestling with and overcoming it, when they regarded themselves at the very best, they should fall, allow themselves to be overcome by their belly and murmur against God, and be so fiercely attacked that they succumb and all be overthrown by Satan. Hence no one is secure, unless his faith continues to grow stronger and stronger.

[5] Moses, who had such an exceedingly strong faith, also fell; when he was to strike water out of the rock with his rod, he doubted and said to the people, Numbers 20:10: "Hear now, ye rebels; shall we bring ye forth water out of this rock?" [According to Luther's translation,

“Come here, let us see if we can bring forth water out of the rock for you.”] The good man, Moses, who had performed so many miracles, is tripped by reason and falls into carnal thoughts, fearing that the unbelief of the people would hinder the great miracle and sign. But he should have adhered firmly to the Word of God and esteemed that higher, greater, stronger and more efficacious than the unbelief of the people; but the good man was so severely tempted that he stumbled and fell.

[6] We have similar examples in the New Testament. Peter was strong and confident in faith. When he saw Jesus walking on the water, he said, impelled by his strong faith, Matthew 14:28: “Lord, bid me come unto thee,” and stepped out of the ship into the water. He was confident that the water would bear him. Peter had a remarkable faith and a bold spirit, so that he ventured upon the water and danger, yea, even death, making the venture boldly and daringly by reason of his faith in Christ. But when he thought he was most secure, the wind and storm arose and he forgot the Word and lost faith; he fell, sank into the water and permitted Satan to tear faith out of his heart. Where was then his great faith? Faith is a tender, subtle thing, and we so easily make a mistake and are liable to stumble; but the devil is watchful, and unless men exercise watchfulness, he quickly gains his point.

[7] How strongly the people were inclined toward Christ! They regarded him as a Prophet, followed him eagerly, defended him with a zeal that even the nobles of the people were amazed and did not dare to lay hands on him. But when he had been seized and bound, and led away and crucified, the people forsook him. Alas! alas! he is no longer a Prophet; no one stands by him, yea, instead they cry out, Luke 23:21, “Crucify him, crucify him!” and what is still worse, his own Disciples forsake him. Where now was their faith and holiness?

[8] So, also, we meet with similar occurrences in our day. At first, when the Gospel was proclaimed, it was a lovely sermon and all the world desired to become Christian, nobody opposed it. But when attacks were made on the monks, priests, and nuns, when the Mass was criticized; alas! they fell like leaves from the trees. Afterwards, when the nobles were also attacked, the Gospel was still more persecuted and its reception began more and more to abate. The devil does not rest yet, and hence he stirs up so many sects and factions. How many sects have we not already had? One has taken up the sword, another has attacked the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, others that of baptism. The devil does not sleep, he will do many more such things, he looks around and exerts himself to exterminate the pure doctrine in the Church and will finally, it is feared, bring it to this, that should one pass through all Germany he would

find no pure pulpit, where the Word of God is preached as in former days. He tries with all his might to prevent the pure doctrine from being taught, for he cannot endure it.

[9] Escape from the enemy is most difficult. He lurks and watches everywhere, and pushes his affairs so hard, that even the learned fall and the elect stumble, as did Moses, St. Peter, and the Apostles. We think we are safe, permit matters to drift along, no one is concerned for his own welfare, no one cares for it. We should pray and call on God to maintain the Gospel and cause his holy name to be proclaimed more and more widely; but no one cares, no one prays for the advancement of the Gospel. The consequence of this must be, God will overthrow both us and Satan. Our end will be, he will make us bite the dust, and through our own rashness and indifference we shall fall into great misery.

[10] The devil also is able to present to the factious spirits the idea that they regard themselves as right, like the Arians who thought their cause was right. But there was no one who could decide whether or not their teachings were orthodox. The Christian, however, subdues his reason and does not deceive himself, but in humility says to God: "Dear Lord, although I feel certain concerning the matter, yet without thee I cannot maintain it; therefore, help me or else I am lost." To be sure he may feel certain of it, like Peter on the water, who could not well feel more sure that the water would bear him on; he knew of no more hindrance; but when the storm burst on him he saw wherein he lacked. The heart must have thoroughly grasped this idea that, although we may feel secure concerning a matter and have Scripture for it, and be prepared and fortified in the best possible manner with clear proofs, it is the power, will and might of God that protect us and defend us against the devil, our adversary and most bitter foe.

[11] This occurs only, however, when God awakens us and keeps us in his fear, so that we may always be concerned and cry to him: "O Lord, help us and increase our faith, for without thee we are lost," Luke 17:5. Our hearts should always be in the condition as if we had only begun to believe today, and always be so disposed toward the Gospel as if we had never before heard it. We should make a fresh beginning each day. The nature and character of faith is constantly to grow and become stronger. The devil, as has already been said, is not idle, and has no rest. If he is struck down once, he will arise again; if he cannot enter at the front door, he sees to it that he enters at the rear; if he cannot effect an entrance in this way, he breaks in through the roof or digs his way through underneath the doorsill, toiling until he effects an entrance,

employing all manner of cunning and schemes. If one way fails, he tries another and perseveres until he succeeds.

[12] Over against this, man is a poor, weak creature, as St. Paul says, Corinthians 4:7, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." The treasure is the Gospel; but I am weaker than the vessel in the potter's hands. An earthen vessel is a weak thing and is easily broken and its contents spilled. Hence the devil, when he notices what a treasure faith is and in what a poor vessel it is kept, rages and storms, and in his wrath says to us: "I will strike you and shatter your vessel: you have a great treasure, but I will spill it for you; I will give you a blow. If I were permitted, how soon would I shatter the vessel. You are after all nothing but a little poor and weak vessel of earth."

[13] So God has placed this poor, little vessel among enemies. How soon may it not therefore, be destroyed! It may be broken with a club; yea, if a serpent would prick it, it would go to pieces. It would be a small matter for Satan suddenly to ruin an entire country. Hence he is angry, because God takes hold of the matter in such a bantering manner and confronts him with a poor little earthen vessel, and yet he is so great a prince and so powerful a lord of the world. I would also be vexed, if I were a strong man and someone were to tickle me with a straw. I would undoubtedly crush the straw in my anger, and would rather be met with spear, sword and complete armor; even as the strong Goliath was vexed because David, without armor, dared to approach him with a staff, 1 Samuel 17:43. Thus, also the devil is angry because God wants to trample him under foot by means of flesh and blood. If a mighty spirit were opposed to him, he would not be so sorely vexed; but it greatly angers him that a poor worm of the dust, a fragile earthen vessel defies him, a weak vessel against a mighty prince. God has placed his treasure, says St. Paul, in a poor, weak vessel; for man is weak, easily aroused to anger, avaricious, arrogant, and weighed down with other imperfections, through which Satan easily shatters the earthen vessel; for if God would permit him, he would soon have utterly destroyed the whole vessel. He breaks many an earthen vessel with false doctrine. Now all this happens, says St. Paul, in order that we may learn our inability to accomplish anything by our own strength, but alone by the power of God. God has, therefore, bid defiance to the devil and said to him: Thou mighty spirit, I will oppose thee with a poor, weak earthen vessel; nevertheless, seize it. This angers the devil exceedingly. Therefore, he goes about, as a roaring lion, in order to break and shatter to pieces the fragile vessels made of earth.

[14] See what he did with the prophets whom the peasants raised up. Certainly, no one did this but the devil, who desired to shatter the vessels and indeed did shatter many of them, so that faith and the Scriptures fared badly among them.

[15] Indeed, more factious spirits shall arise and it shall come to pass that they will not regard Christ as God, nor as the son of a virgin. For the devil is so cunning and skillful that, if one thing is taken from him, he makes use of another. Thus, it has been from the beginning, and it will continue to be so in the future. And all this is permitted, in order that we may be on our guard, lift up our eyes to heaven, so that we may know and acknowledge God, and, if we have made a beginning in faith, that God may nourish and protect the same and preserve the vessel by his power. But Satan would gladly break this earthen vessel and crush it under his feet. Others, who belong to him, he pushes hither and thither, according to his pleasure, and rejoices in them. — This is intended to serve as an introduction to the Gospel. We will now consider the text in its proper order. The Evangelist says: “And there was a certain nobleman, whose son was sick at Capernaum.”

[16] This has occurred to other people also, namely, that they have had sick children; but what is to be particularly noted here, appears in these words: “When he heard that Jesus was come out of Judea into Galilee, he went unto him, and besought him that he would come down, and heal his son; for he was at the point of death.”

[17] Here begins the faith that depends on Christ. This Gospel shows that he had faith; for he hears of Christ, how he heals the sick; his heart recognizes Christ, cleaves to him and thinks thus: If he helps all others, he will also help me and heal my son. He regarded Christ as the person who can help men, and he expects every benefit from him. This indeed, is the heart of a true Christian, since it leads him to attach himself to Christ. If, however, this nobleman had remained in doubt, he would not have come to Christ, but his heart would have been in the condition to say: “He, indeed, helps others, but who knows if he will help me also;” and he might have left the matter rest at this. But his faith was a living faith, and hence he arose and went to Christ. This was the beginning of faith.

[18] Now you shall see how strangely and contrary to expectation Christ met him and how his faith was tried, when he said to him: “Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will in no wise believe.”

[19] How are we to understand this? He says, Ye do not believe, and yet ye have faith? Thus, the Lord also spoke to Peter, Matthew 14:31, "O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?" Peter was confident and had faith; therefore, he ventured out on the water; but when he saw the storm rage, he doubted and sank. So here also: The nobleman had heard reports concerning Christ, that he was helping everybody. He believed this and came to him. But when he heard that Christ refused to come to him, he felt hurt and his faith drooped, and he feared lest Christ would refuse to help him. This was a rebuff and here began the trial of incipient faith; for this was a hard saying, "Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will in no wise believe." This expression was a trial of his faith, and produced a doubt, and caused him to stumble. The devil stood back of him and said: Return to your home, await the result; he will not help you. But the nobleman was not so easily repulsed, but said to the Lord: "Sir, come down ere my child die."

[20] Faith was ready to droop and sink; but the Lord did not forsake him, raised him up and said to him: "Go thy way; thy son liveth."

[21] He must have had a pure faith, or else he would not have asked the Lord to come to his son. What then did he lack? This: He believed if Christ came to his house, he could heal his son; but unless he were present, he could not effect the cure. His faith was not strong enough to realize that Christ could heal without being present. Hence, his faith had to attain a higher stage. His weak faith was gone, the little earthen vessel was shattered, and he thought his son had to die; but Christ approached, raised him up, placed him on a higher plane of faith, and said to him: "Go thy way; thy son liveth." Thus, the man advanced from his first faith, when he believed that Christ could heal if he were present, to a higher stage of faith, by reason of which he now believed the mere word of Christ. For if he had not believed the Word, he would not have ceased until the Lord had accompanied him to his house; but he accepted the Word, believed Christ and clung to his word; for the son was at home, and Christ was with the father.

[22] The father accepted the word of Christ and said in his heart: My son is ill; but I shall find him well. This was faith over against reason and experience. Reason would have led him to say: When I left my son, he was ill. As you left him, so you shall find him. But faith says the contrary, stands firmly on the Word and drowns itself in it, and does not at all doubt that it shall be as the Word declares: "Go thy way; thy son liveth."

[23] This is a pure and strong faith, that requires the individual to cast away all sense, understanding, reason, eyes and heart, and sink himself into one little word and be satisfied with and feel secure in it. Christ says, Thy son liveth, so he says to himself: It is certainly true, I shall find it so. Thus, faith does not remain idle or quiet, but progresses and rises higher.

[24] So Christ also deals with us and permits us to be tried, in order to strengthen our faith. If at the close of our lives, when our time comes to die, we shall have a spark of such faith, it will be well with us; as Christ said to his disciples in the Gospel, Matthew 17:20, "If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say to this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible to you." A mustard seed is very small, but he who has such faith, shall certainly be saved. The truth lies not in the fact that faith is small; but in that the mustard seed remains and is not destroyed by the birds; that the devil cannot tear faith out of our hearts. It does not matter how insignificant faith may be; but the power lies in seeing to it that faith be not overthrown.

[25] Peter on the water retained his pure faith as long as he unhesitatingly ventured on the water according to the word of Christ; for that reason the water bore him and he did not sink. Had he remained in this faith, he might have gone hundreds of miles on the water; but as soon as he wavered, he began to sink. So also Moses, who had a strong faith, but fell from it. Therefore, it does not matter whether faith be strong or weak; but that it perseveres, no matter how weak it may be. It may happen that he who has a weak faith, abides in faith; and that he who has a strong faith, doubts and falls. Moses and Peter had great and strong faith, so that Moses by faith led the people of Israel through the midst of the sea and through death, and Peter boldly ventured on the sea; but they both fell, although God raised them up again. But the thief on the cross laid hold on faith once for all and clung to it.

[26] God deals with us in a way so as to put down arrogance, and that we may not become haughty and wanton, but always remain in his fear. For when temptation comes, we are liable to fall into error. We have a beautiful parable of this in the tree which begins to blossom in the spring, and soon spreads out entirely covered with white blossoms; but as soon as rain falls on it many of the blossoms are ruined, and frost utterly destroys many more of them. Afterwards when the fruit begins to appear and any wind happens to arise, much of the young fruit falls to the ground; when the fruit has more fully developed, caterpillars and worms make their appearance, and they prick and destroy the fruit to such an extent, that scarcely the twentieth part, yea, hardly a hundredth part ripens. The same thing happens to the Gospel. At first

everybody wants to become a Christian, it promises to do well and is pleasing to all men: but as soon as the wind or rain of temptation comes, large numbers fall away. Afterwards come the sects and factions, like worms and beetles, which prick and pollute the fruit of the Gospel, and so much false doctrine is taught, that only a few remain faithful to the Gospel.

[27] This parable is a sign and picture of true faith. Thus, faith first consists in this, that we may be not secure and presumptuous, but remain in fear. By the grace of God we are rich in the Word of God and have been brought out of deep and great darkness; but we forget the Word, become weak, continue unconcerned about the matter and have no taste for it. If, under these conditions false prophets should break in with their false teachings and even the devil burst in, and find us idle and the house swept and garnished, he brings with him seven other spirits, more wicked than himself, and our last state is worse than the first. And even if this should happen, we are not therefore, to despair, but instruct one another, so that we cling to God and pray to him, saying: "Merciful God, thou hast permitted me to become a Christian, help me to continue to be one and to increase daily in faith. Even if the whole world should fall, and each one conspire to do evil, and the devil break all the earthen vessels, yet I will not be turned by it, but by thy divine help will abide in the Gospel." Each one should think of the matter, as if he were alone in the world; even as it will be in death at the end of the world, when no one will be concerned about others, but each one must be concerned about himself.

[28] Thus, the faith of this man was most excellent and noble. He hears the single word, "Thy son liveth." He believes it and goes home, gives the glory to God, grasps the word, clings to it, and does not grope after other things. Hence God also honors him in return, heals his son, lifts him up and increases his faith, does not permit him to remain in doubt and in weakness, but makes him certain and strong in faith, permits him to continue and become stronger. Nor does he wait until the man has returned to his home, but while he is still on the way allows the restoration of his son to be announced to him, permits his servants to meet him on the way, who bring him the joyous tidings, saying, "Thy son liveth." For God cannot delay and remain outside, where there is a true heart, which depends solely on him and clings to his Word, and lets everything else go and looks only to the Word of God. In a case like this, God cannot hide himself, but permits himself to be seen and enters his heart and makes his abode there, as we read in St. John's Gospel, John 14:23. Thus, he richly manifested himself to this nobleman, and for this reason, that we might understand the nature of this man's faith, namely, an excellent and true faith, that was produced purely by the Word of God.

[29] What is more blessed and joyous than to believe God's Word and cling to it in the face of all temptations, and to shut the eyes to all temptations of the devil, to lay aside sense and understanding, reason and cunning, and unceasingly say in one's heart: "God has spoken, he cannot lie?" Nothing can be more joyful, I say, than such faith. For whatever we ask of God in such faith, we receive more abundantly than we can ever imagine, and God is nearer to us than we can realize. In a word, it all depends upon our belief and trust in him. Therefore, the Evangelist uses so many unnecessary words, as it seems to us, as these: "The man believed the word that Jesus spake unto him, and he went his way. And as he was now going down, his servants met him, saying, that his son lived. So he inquired of them the hour when he began to amend. They said therefore, unto him, Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him. So the father knew that it was at that hour in which Jesus said unto him, Thy son liveth."

[30] All this means, if we believe and trust in God, we shall know that he will richly give us all things for which we pray. And the Evangelist concludes the Gospel with these words: "And himself believed and his whole house."

[31] Thus, his faith had increased, not only that he had risen from a lower to a higher stage of faith, but also that he had caused the members of his household to believe. He did not merely abide in faith, but he had an active faith, which did not lie still and idle in his heart, but broke forth and was exposed to others, and preached Christ to others and praised him before them, telling them how he had come to Christ, received consolation from him and how he had received help through his faith, so that all who were in his house had to believe. For it is the character and nature of faith that it attracts other people, breaks forth and becomes active in love, as St. Paul says, Galatians 5:6, "Faith working through love" is the thing that avails; for it lives and can neither remain silent, nor inactive, as King David says, Psalm 116:10, and as St. Paul, referring to believers, says, Corinthians 4:13, "I believed and therefore, did I speak." Faith cannot do otherwise, it must break forth and speak; it cannot remain quiet, for it desires to benefit its neighbor. This man had faith for himself; but it did not remain such, but broke forth; for he doubtless preached to his household, telling them how he had come to Christ and received comfort from him; and no doubt they believed his words.

[32] Thus, we see, if we believe we are to open our mouths and confess the grace God has shown us. This also is the greatest and best work of faith, namely, to inform and teach others in the Word; for as Paul says, Romans 10:10, "With the heart, man believeth unto

righteousness; and with the mouth, confession is made unto salvation.” If one is ashamed of the Word and hides it, it is a sign of a lax faith.

[33] Thus, we see that Christ makes no distinction between weak and strong faith, and rejects no one; for weak faith is also faith, and if it only continues, it will ever grow stronger-d. He came into the world, to receive the weak, and to carry and sustain them. If he were as impatient as we are, he would at once say to us: “Depart from me. I will have nothing to do with you; for you do not believe as you ought.” Who could receive help from him? But the great art of Christ is to know how to deal gently with the weak, not to knock them about and impatiently drive them away. Even though today they may not be strong, it may happen in an hour’s time that they grasp the Word more richly than we who regard ourselves as strong.

[34] Thus, we should teach one another to cling to his Word. For if we abide in his Word, we shall be sufficiently fortified against the devil; for we have a defiance of him in the Word, even though we ourselves are weak. But to the devil, who in an hour’s time could break in pieces all earthen vessels, all men would be as a feather, and he could blow them when and where he wished; but this feather shall become heavier for him than heaven and earth. For a Christian has Christ within himself; but Christ is heavier than heaven and earth. This must suffice concerning this Gospel.

[35] We have made a beginning in the attempt to formulate a German Mass. You know that the Mass is the most important external office, that has been instituted for the comfort of true Christians. Therefore, I beseech you Christians, that you may pray and supplicate God, that this work may be acceptable to him. You have often heard that no one should teach, unless he knows, that this is the Word of God. Hence nothing should be ordered or arranged unless we know that it is acceptable to God. Nor should we depend on our reason; for unless it begins of its own accord, nothing will come of it. For this reason I have hesitated so long with reference to the German Mass, in order that I might not give any encouragement to the sectarian spirits, who rush into things without thought, and have no regard whether it is God’s pleasure or not. But now, since so many people from all countries have requested me, by petitions and letters, and since the secular government forces me to it, we could not well excuse ourselves and evade the matter but must regard it as the will of God. If there is anything, therefore, in this work that is human and our own, let it fall and perish, even though it have a grand and fine appearance. But if it is the work of God, it must go forward, even though it appear foolish. Therefore, all things that God does, even though not acceptable to anyone, must prosper.

Therefore, I beseech you to pray the Lord, that, if it is a proper or correct Mass, it may be maintained to his honor and glory.

SOURCE

Martin Luther's Church Postil, the complete Lenker edition in one volume (Lutheran Library, CC BY 4.0), PDF pages 1601–1614.
Heading in that edition: "Twenty-First Sunday after Trinity. Second Sermon. Faith in General and in Detail."