

How to Do What You Cannot Do



Gary Wilkerson July 7, 2014

Most of us would like the ability to do certain things in life that we can't do. I'm talking about things that are not just hard but impossible. I think of my garage as an impossible mess, but I have the ability to clean it. I don't need faith in God to do that task.

Lately I've discovered that the things in life most important to me are the ones I can't do. For instance, even if I summon all my strength, power and resources I cannot bring back to Christ one of my children, who is a prodigal. I can pray for him, fast for days, share the Bible with him, even cry out his name to Jesus each night — but I have no power to fix his problem. There isn't an ounce of anything in my being that can accomplish his return to the Lord.

Even for the most devoted followers of Jesus, it is impossible to fix certain things. But we do know the One who can. The wonderful thing about life in Christ is that we get to engage in amazing things we couldn't do on our own. In fact, Jesus calls us to participate with him in accomplishing what we cannot do ourselves: to see lost loved ones come to faith, to see broken marriages restored and healed, to see unsaved people in our community rescued from a hopeless eternity. Through our faith in Jesus, we get to see — and even take part in — such things as they are accomplished by his power, majesty and authority.

The writer of Hebrews bombards us with the concept of faith.

Hebrews 11 is the chapter known as the “Hall of Faith,” listing biblical figures who pleased God through great acts of faith. From Abraham to Sarah to David to Samuel to Gideon and a host of others, we see believers commended not for their talents or achievements but for trusting God to do what was beyond their abilities. Together they comprise “a huge cloud of witnesses to the *life of faith*” (*Hebrews 12:1, my emphasis*).

That italicized phrase tells us there is a “life of faith” to be lived. And to attain that life, we are urged to lay aside every weight that prevents us from trusting faith: “Let us strip off every weight” (12:1). What are these weights, these obstacles to faith? I know many Christians who are weighed down by unbelief. As they consider their circumstances they think, “My need will never be filled. I've prayed endlessly. I've asked others to pray for me, including church elders, but the answer never comes. Nothing I've tried works.”

The problem for many is that they look to their circumstances more than to the God who controls all circumstances. Their faith ends up stalled by a “weight that slows us down” (12:1). I can assure you, what God has promised can never be thwarted. Every word he sends forth will ultimately be accomplished. Satan knows this, and all he can do is try to slow down God's purposes by convincing us to wallow in our difficulties. If your situation seems hopeless, the life of faith calls you to believe, “One day God will fulfill what I'm unable to envision now.”

We are hindered also by “the sin that so easily trips us up” (12:1). As we run the race of faith despite our difficulties, the enemy sticks his foot out to trip us. This often happens after our greatest times of victory. One moment we think, “God is on the move! Now I'll see his promise come to pass,” but then our situation turns in the opposite direction, tripping up our faith. We're left thinking, “Lord, I thought this was my breakthrough. Now things are worse than ever.”

So, where is our hope? We find it at the verse's end: “Let us run *with endurance* the race God has set before us”

(12:1, *my emphasis*). Though our circumstances cause us to doubt and we are easily tripped up by sin, the race we're in is about *endurance*. We are instructed, "We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus" (*Hebrews 12:2*). Our race isn't about mustering up enough faith. We can't muster anything on our own. We have to look to Jesus to supply us with faith, for he is "the champion who initiates" (12:2).

What a wonderful thing: Christ initiates the faith in our heart! Long before he called us to run our particular race, the thought was in his mind, "I want to see this done." So he initiated faith in us and set us on a race to see his purpose accomplished.

Tell me, what has happened to the faith God initiated in your heart? Do you feel it has died? Are you weary after being tripped up so many times? Friend, do not despair: God has promised to initiate faith in you, and that includes reigniting the faith you have known. "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (*Romans 10:17*).

If your promise has not been fulfilled, you can trust God is at work "perfecting your faith."

"The champion who initiates and *perfects* our faith" (*Hebrews 12:2, my emphasis*). There are many things I hope for in all godly sincerity, but some are not initiated by God. For example, I hope with all my heart that our church in Colorado Springs will be influential in seeing tens of thousands of people come to Christ in the coming decades. God hasn't promised this to me, but still I hope and pray he rends the heavens to bring the lost into his loving arms.

We all need to be careful about taking our hopes and making them into promises. We can only be assured something is a promise from God when it is confirmed through Scripture, prayer and sometimes fellow Christians.

You may be saying, "I had a word of assurance from God that he would save my marriage, but it didn't happen." I am cautious about saying this to anyone who has endured that kind of devastation: Maybe what you heard was not God's promise to you, but the sincere, hopeful desire of your own heart. Can you allow yourself that mercy in your situation?

Don't misunderstand: Nobody has ever been wrong to want their marriage to last. But God has never failed to keep a promise he makes. He is not 99 percent faithful; he's 100 percent faithful. He has never failed, never lied, never misspoken. And the truth is we are all vulnerable to tragedy in a world that's broken by sin.

It is also possible for us to hear the voice of our own ambitions and desires. We may hope for certain things, including good things, and yet, as James writes, God won't give us those requests because they are born out of our own striving and flesh.

Instead, God perfects our faith by putting those things away. Speaking as a man in midlife, I am so glad the Lord does this. There are many things I wanted in my thirties that I'm glad he never gave me. In his mercy God saw what I needed, and he didn't allow the things I wanted. By perfecting our faith in this way, the desires he initiates — those things born of him and not of ourselves — begin to rise up in our hearts.

"Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen" (11:1). As God purifies our faith, our confidence builds. We grow in discernment, saying, "Ah, yes, this is the word of the Lord, and that other word is not. He is confirming his promise to me — through Scripture, prayer and the witness of my brothers and sisters." Faith begins to settle the matter within us, so that as *Hebrews 11:1* says, we have "confidence that what we hope for will actually happen."

This kind of faith was perfected in those listed in the Hall of Faith. According to that chapter, God commended Abel not for his worthy sacrifice of worship but for his faith. Noah wasn't commended for being a preacher of righteousness but for his faith. Moses wasn't commended for being a bold deliverer but for his faith.

Put very simply, what pleases God is faith. Why? It is because nothing can be accomplished for his kingdom except through faith. This is why some of the quietest, most introverted people are often the most powerfully effective evangelists. They win people to Jesus not by anything in their flesh but because they trust Christ to do what he has promised.

Whenever God gives us a promise, he first has to put it to death in our flesh.

To have the kind of faith that pleases God, we often have to be taken through the most frustrating, irritating, fist-clinching experiences. Maybe you've been at the point where you cried, "Lord, you gave me a promise, but now you've taken away everything that could make that promise possible."

Why does God do this? Why does he remove all natural means through which his promise could be fulfilled? Often, it is so our relationship with him will be pleasurable rather than dutiful. You see, if his promises could be fulfilled through our abilities, we would be in performance mode 24/7. That is not his way. Instead, he asks us into an ongoing relationship, one that requires the trust of our whole hearts.

That's how the great cloud of witnesses before us made it into his Hall of Faith. Scripture says when God promised to make Abraham the father of all nations, Abraham "figured his body was as good as dead" (*Romans 4:19*). That word "figured" is a mathematical term. Abraham realized that nothing in his life "added up" to see this promise fulfilled. Nothing in his power could make it work. And yet we read, "Abraham never wavered in believing God's promise. In fact, his faith grew stronger" (*4:20*).

Here is a picture of Jesus initiating and perfecting a godly man's faith. The more Abraham figured, "I can't do this," the stronger his faith in God's ability grew. And through the death of his flesh came a power that was not of himself. It was the power of the Holy Spirit.

I want to see my son return to the Lord. To see that accomplished, I put my faith in God's power to draw him with overwhelming love. (*I am happy to report that since this message was preached, my prodigal son has been gloriously reconciled to God and to his family.*) I still want to see thousands of lost people in our city come to Jesus. Yet I know that will never happen by strategizing, planning or putting programs into place. Those things may be useful at some point, but only Jesus can initiate anything for his kingdom. Only he can perfect in us the trusting faith required to see multitudes of souls brought into eternal life.

Yes, we are called to do the things we can do for Christ's kingdom. But we are also called to more. Do you want to see God's purposes accomplished in your community, his promises fulfilled in your life? He asks only that you trust him by living a life of faith. He will do what is far beyond your ability, for only he can do it!

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