
Towards a Long Life of Faith

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 21 June 2026

Romans 6:1-11 • Matthew 10:24-33



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Today's passage from Paul's letter to the Romans makes definite statements about faith. Paul is trying to encourage the new little church at Rome, by reaffirming what he taught its people when he was with them. He is worried that their faith will slip away when he's not there to reinforce it. They are like his children. He wants them to mature in faith, but he doesn't think they are mature yet. So he explains at great length what baptism means: literally dying to sin and being resurrected as a new creation, in parallel with Christ's resurrection, and due to it. We are resurrected and freed from sin because Christ was resurrected and took our sins to the grave with him. Our sins are dead and gone, but we have new life.

Paul makes definite and definitive statements, which must elicit a response from his readers and hearers. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Romans 6:3) "We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed" (6:6). Paul urges Christ's church to learn what Christ has done for

them, and to be sure of their salvation: to know and be sure. There is no two ways about it for Paul: we have died with Christ, and we have been resurrected with Christ. We know it.

But sometimes, being human with our human frailties, we doubt. Can all of this be true? Can this wonderful unseen God love us and save us from ourselves — and Satan?

I think of my own faith. Sometimes, the logical part of my brain thinks: ‘How can I believe in a God whom I cannot see, hear, or feel? If God doesn’t talk to me or show himself, how can he be real?’ But when this happens, the next thought quickly comes: ‘I hope God won’t be angry with me for thinking this!’ It’s automatic — when I doubt, I also confirm. It’s like a little boy boasting to his friends: ‘I can do what I want. I don’t care what my mother says!’ Then, as he walks away, he thinks to himself: ‘Gosh, I hope mum didn’t hear me say that!’ The boy really does recognise his mother’s authority, just as I recognise God’s existence and presence. And I recognise it deep down inside me. Surface thoughts will not budge my faith, and the proof of this is what I am feeling deep down when the surface thoughts appear. That’s how I know I really believe in God.

Listening to someone like Richard Dawkins, atheist and author of *The God Delusion*, can at times cause us to doubt. But his arguments are only on the surface, in the day-to-day cold logic of the conscious mind. God lies deeper than that. God lies inside our subconscious as well, inside our very hearts and souls. God is there inside us because we accepted Christ as our Saviour. God has written his word on our hearts. A few scratches on the surface will not mar the beauty of the treasure which lies within us. And years of thoughtful belief will only make our faith grow stronger. Eugene Peterson speaks about “a long obedience in the same direction.” Faith reinforces faith, and faith deepens through years of prayer and believing and trusting in Jesus Christ. It’s a phrase he borrowed from Friedrich Nietzsche:

The essential thing ‘in heaven and earth’ is ... that there should be long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living.”¹

It is the life in Christ which is the life worth living. From our faith in Christ flows everything we most value: love, friendship, family. In our Christ-centered life, we are obedient disciples, apprentices to our master Jesus. When we have once made that commitment, and confirmed it and reinforced it continually for years, then we will know what Paul means when he says that

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, quoted in Peterson, Eugene H, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 1980), p17.

nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:39).

Peterson was concerned about the fast pace of life in the modern world. Instant gratification is a phrase on everyone's lips: we recognise that people want results now. Long study is not popular. We flip from one thing to another. The drive is always for "new and improved." And computers and smart phones don't help the situation, as useful as they are; they just make it that much easier to spend a minute on sixty things, when we should be spending an hour on one thing. But God is worth our long study. I'm a relatively new Christian, but I've spent time every morning for over fifteen years reading my Bible. I've missed, I believe, no more than a handful of mornings in all that time. And I'm sure some of you can boast of much longer engagement with the word (remember, we're allowed to boast in Jesus Christ!). What else have I spent that long doing, besides sleeping, eating and breathing? Well, I was married to Melissa for almost 40 years, that's longer. I've played guitar for fifty years, and I've driven a car about that long too. But even if I were to become a Segovia on the guitar or a Michael Schumacher in a car, my time with the Bible has been far more valuable than any of that. For it has taught me about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

We all need encouragement from time to time. For that reason, God made churches. Just as Paul encourages his friends in Rome and the other churches he started in various places, we encourage each other. Faith grows in congregations. I have been terrifically encouraged many times through conversations with you. Seeing your faith bolsters mine, and we both benefit. When doubts creep in, and they will from time to time, I think of you all and the strong faith I can see in you. As Paul often said, grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.