

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The beauty business is big business. Adorning ourselves, perfecting every perceived imperfection, curling what is straight, straightening what is curly, bleaching this/highlighting that, products that promise to make youngsters look older and oldsters look younger never lose their appeal. “Stuff” made out of low-tech squished fruit or high-tech spliced genes all promise to adorn and ultimately to transform our faces, save our skin, and sanctify our souls.

If only we will buy just this ONE product.

An Arizona based cosmetics firm calling itself “Philosophy” sells a moisturizer it calls “Hope in a Jar.” The label on this jar of “hope” declares “Where there is hope there can be faith. Where there is faith, miracles can occur.” Here the cosmetics company provides (for a hefty price) the “hope in a jar.” But the consumer must supply their own “faith” if they expect a “miracle” to occur.

We all KNOW that nothing we smear on our face, or rub through our hair, or massage into our “love handles” is really going to defy the space-time continuum and strip away everything wrinkled, grey, or saggy. We all KNOW that if that super-secret skin serum being hawked on that late-night infomercial could really do what it claims, its manufacturers wouldn’t have to be advertising it on a late-night infomercial.

But.

And every cosmetic manufacturer in the world loves, depends, exists on this “but.” BUT we do have “hope.” The problem with this “hope” is that too often it is rooted in “hype.” Unlikely. Unproveable. Unrepeatable. Unreliable. Hype.

Hope based on hype leads nowhere at best, hell at worst.

The passionate preacher of the “Letter to the Hebrews” didn’t give his spiritually exhausted congregation a message of “hope” based on hype. He didn’t weave them a yarn about a perfect life that was just around the corner. Instead, he spoke about FAITH<sup>1</sup>.

He tells us that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen<sup>2</sup>” and then gives us a partial list of biblical superstars who have been guided and sustained by a faith that brought them hope for a future that they might not even live to see... Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, David, by extension, Mary, Peter, Paul, Lydia, and later Francis of Assisi, John Wesley, Francis Asbury, Howard Thurman, Martin Luther King, Jr. just to name a few of the folks who make up the Faithful Hall of Fame.

Faith isn’t some belief in spiritual things, or having religious feelings, or even trusting that God will do stuff I ask for. The author of Hebrews defines faith as the substance, the foundation, of things hoped for. Late in his life, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “I am no longer optimistic, but I remain hopeful.” Referencing this quote, Dr James Howell reminds us that “optimism believes that things will get better tomorrow; hope is ready if things don’t get better. Optimism is *up to us* doing better; hope depends on God<sup>3</sup>.”

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<sup>1</sup> Illustration by Leonard Sweet. Accessed by subscription to [sermons.com](http://sermons.com) on 8/10/19.

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 11:1 NRSV

<sup>3</sup> [jameshowellsweeklypreachingnotions.blogspot.com](http://jameshowellsweeklypreachingnotions.blogspot.com) for 8/11/19 accessed 8/10/19

The unseen things that are referenced in the text are not some invisible spiritual realities, at least not according to the Bible's understanding. The unseen things are in the future. Since our future with God is secure, faith can live in the uncertainty and even the agony of the now. As Dr. Luke Timothy Johnson states, "faith makes actual, or makes 'real,' for believers the things that are hoped for, as though they are present.. They are understood to be as real, or even more real, than things that can be seen, that is, that are verified by the senses."

It is worth noting that in this Faithful Hall of Fame, the examples given were asked to step out of their comfort zone and to trust God. Abraham was given a promise that his descendants would be a countless number, but he would need to go. "Where God?" You are to go where I send you. And Abraham went in faith and trust. Sarah was told that she would bear a son. She was in her 80's at the time and she laughed, belly laughed at the very idea. Now, I don't know about you, but I wouldn't want to have the responsibility of a child at that age, and I would probably laugh too, a nervous laughter at the absurdity of it all, but God kept that promise. Neither Abraham or Sarah lived to see the fulfillment of God's promise but their faith kept hope alive.

Moses objected to God's calling. If you remember when God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush, Moses tried every way possible to get out of what God called him to do. He wasn't a good speaker, he was a wanted man, "God, can't anyone else do this?" But God called him to go tell Pharaoh to "let my people go" and then lead them to the promised land. In faith, Moses did what God told him to do, but he didn't live to enter the land that was promised to them, though he did view it before his death.

All of these pillars of the faith had great faith. They trusted in the promises of God. But they also had doubts. Doubts about their abilities. Doubts about the demands that God was placing upon their lives. As followers of Christ, we, too,

live with doubts. And I want to emphasize to you that there is nothing wrong with doubt.

Doubt without faith is despair. But faith without doubt is *certainty*. And both despair and certainty are death traps. Without faith, doubt only offers a bottomless pit of tumbling in a universe without unity, of sentience without any reason for sensibility. Without the stress of that tightly held string running between faith and doubt, we have no firm ground upon which to place our lives. Only a trampoline at best. But we need that tightrope. We need that lifeline. Faith and doubt go together, you cannot have one without the other and still stay in connection with this world.

The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty, and control, and fear. The very definition of faith as “the substance of things HOPED FOR, the evidence of thing NOT SEEN” makes doubt every Christian’s middle name. We all have the apostle Thomas, “Doubting Thomas” middle name, “Didymus”—meaning “the twin.” All people who confess faith are also people who admit to doubt—the other end of the string that keeps them strung. We all are two people, “Didymus” people, people of faith and people of doubt. We are people who trust enough to quest, but also people who continue to question.

Jesus was history’s greatest questioner. He loved to entertain questions, honored people’s questions, and often answered questions with another question. Questioning, doubting: that was the Jesus way to greater understanding and learning. But never the way to *complete* understanding. For in a state of complete understanding there is no need for faith. The prerequisite for faith is doubt. Questions open us up and stretch us to another level of life and living. Answers and certainties *shut us down*. The moment we think we have all the answers, at that moment we make ourselves God—and we call our insights “religion.”

Frederick Nietzsche declared, “It is not doubt, it is certainty that makes one mad.” Who can deny that it was a certainty of madness that caused a 21-year old man to drive 9 hours to El Paso to a borderline WalMart in order to mow down men, women, and two year old children with an automatic weapon? Here was a man of no faith but absolute “certainty” he had the right answers. He did not have faith. He did not have doubts. He knew it all, and know-it-alls quickly become “special agents of the Lord” with evil missions.

God does not deliver e-mail messages that “tell you what to do.” A life of faith is lived on that tightrope that enables us to balance delicately between faith and doubt. Without both ends intact, the rope collapses, and we fall into despair.

Sister Joan Chittister in *A Faith To Live By* (2012) declared “I love doubt—it is the one thing you can be sure of is stretching you.” Do you love doubt? Does doubt power you up, or shut you down? We all have moments (days, weeks, months?) of unsteadiness in our faith. Can our churches be safe places for those with shaky faith, for those struggling with bouts of doubt?

Will this church embrace the middle name of all its members—Doubter? The church breathes faith and doubt as surely as we have two lungs that breathe in and out. A “faithful” life is only growing and viable if it’s roots have the richness of doubt, of questioning, of in-the-face confrontation. It’s doubt that keeps the string of life strung and strong enough to be a life-time life-line we can walk upon until we cross over to the other side.

In his final sermon on April 3, 1968, addressing a crowd gathered at the Mason Temple in Memphis supporting the black sanitation workers who were striking over abysmal pay and working conditions, Dr. King said:

*Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the*

*mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! And so I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!*

Now, here we are, some 51 years after Dr King's assassination. For a while, I thought that the promised land was in sight. Yet, it feels as if we are still wandering in the wilderness. Not with the light of a Coleman lantern to light our way, but with the light of a smudge pot style lamp that would have been common in the time that this epistle to the Hebrews was written - allowing us to barely see beyond the stride of our own two feet. Like Dr King, I am no longer optimistic, but I remain hopeful that, with God's help, we can put aside our differences and recognize that in our common humanity, we are all made in the image of the living God. That, we are all precious in God's sight and that God loves us all equally and wants us all to be in a deep relationship with him, both personal and corporate. This hope is built on our relationship with Jesus Christ. For Jesus is the rock upon which our faith is built. He is the foundation upon which our hope is built. And through Christ, our hope is not a vain hope or a hope built on hype. He is, as the old spiritual reminds us, a rock in a weary land. A foundation upon which we can rest as we prepare to fight the good fight.

Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.