

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 23 August 2020. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

Steps to Fruitfulness

2 Peter 1:5

This morning, we sang the hymn “Higher Ground.” This song was written by Johnson Oatman; and ever since it was published in the year 1898, it has been a great encouragement to Christians. From its early days, it was a favourite song in churches and revival meetings. To this day, Christians all over the world can still relate to Oatman’s desire to move from one “higher plain” of holy living to another.

Now, many of the hymns that we sing have a specific story behind them—some powerful event in the author’s life, which prompted him (or her) to write the hymn. Such doesn’t seem to be the case with this hymn. We don’t know of any particular event in Johnson Oatman’s life which prompted him to write this hymn. All we know is that he wrote this hymn in 1892, shortly after he had moved to Chicago from New Jersey. We also know that, during his lifetime, he wrote at least 3,000 hymns. Some people claim that Oatman wrote as many as 5,000 hymns! Yet, as prolific a hymnwriter as he was, hymn writing was not his profession. Early in life, he was ordained as a Gospel minister; but he never actually served as a pastor of a church. He served as a teacher and a music minister in his local church; but he never received any wages for his service. He never made a living as a minister, nor as a hymn writer. All his life, he was a businessman. First, he worked for his father’s mercantile business; and then, after his father’s death, he worked in the insurance business. Undoubtedly, his work kept him busy. Yet, somehow, he found the time to write an average of 2 hymns per week until his death in 1922!

Now, what would prompt a busy merchant and insurance man to carve out the time to write that many hymns? Surely he must have earned some good money on the side, right? Actually, no. Not once did Oatman receive more than \$1.00 for any of his hymns.¹ Oatman himself later said, “As a fact beyond my ability to understand, I never edited a book of songs that reimbursed me in royalties to the amount of money it cost me to gather the copy for the printer.”² In other words, he didn’t make any profit from his hymns: instead, he always *lost* money.

Why did he do it, then? Obviously, it wasn’t for any earthly gain. He wanted something greater than what this world can afford. Though he made a comfortable living in his mercantile and insurance business, he sought for something higher and nobler—something above this world. He wanted a closer relationship with the Lord. He wanted to move to higher plateaus of holy living. Though he often experienced doubts and fears, he wanted to rise above those doubts and fears, by faith. Ultimately, his eye was on heaven. He wanted to “scale the utmost height, and catch a gleam of glory bright.”

This should be the desire of every true child of God! As Christians, we should always be moving to higher ground. We should always be seeking to be more effective in our service to God. Our heart’s desire should be to bring forth more fruit for God. First, we should be growing in faith. Then, to our faith, we should be adding virtue; and then to virtue, knowledge; and then to knowledge, temperance; and

¹ <https://revivalsounds.homestead.com/midihymnhistory/higherground.html>.

² Christ Fenner, *Hymnology Archive*, 21 January 2020, <https://www.hymnologyarchive.com/higher-ground>.

then to temperance, patience; and then to patience, godliness; and then to godliness, brotherly kindness; and then to brotherly kindness, charity. In short, our desire should be to become more like Christ.

It is my prayer that, should any of you be lost, you would believe on Christ and be saved, and become spiritually alive to Him. It is also my prayer that every believer in this room would allow Christ to develop these eight spiritual qualities in you, so that you can bear much fruit for Him. This morning, we will focus on the first two of these qualities, in this message that I have entitled *Steps to Fruitfulness*.

Read 2 Peter 1:5-8.

I. The first step to fruitfulness: Faith

In **verses 5-8**, Peter gives us a list of eight spiritual qualities that every Christian should have; and the very first spiritual quality that he names is **faith**. Every other spiritual quality must be built upon faith. Faith is the foundation and the starting point of the Christian life. And what is faith? It is complete trust and dependence upon God.

Now, it is not natural for men to have faith in God. The Bible makes it clear that our sin blinds our eyes to the truth, and hardens our hearts against God, so that we cannot believe His words. Every one of us was born in this condition of spiritual deadness, darkness, unbelief, rebellion against God, and separation from Him. David wrote, ***“Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Psalm 51:5).***

That’s scary stuff, folks! If we were all born in sin, and if sin separate us from the life of God, and keep us in spiritual darkness, then how can we exercise faith at all? How can faith even begin to spring up in our hearts? Well, here it is: faith is awakened in sinners’ hearts as they listen to and *heed* the words of this Book. **Romans 10:17** says, ***“So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”***

Real faith has a definite starting point; and that starting point is at the moment of **salvation**. Remember—every sinner, in his natural state, is in darkness. In our natural state, we cannot believe God’s words. However, as a sinner listens to God’s Word, the Holy Spirit speaks to that person’s heart, and enables him not only to *understand* the Gospel, but to *believe* it. At this point, the sinner has a choice to make. To those who will yield to the Holy Spirit’s conviction, God imparts the very faith that he needs to believe the Gospel; and as soon as a person believes the Gospel, God gives him the gift of salvation. The moment you believe on Christ, you are birthed into God’s family! You are sealed with the Spirit of God; and through the Holy Spirit, you are now able to start living a new life, by faith in God.

Now, if you have never placed your faith in Christ, then you have no spiritual life in you at all. It doesn’t matter how religious you may consider yourself to be: you are lost. Merely calling yourself a Christian does not make you a Christian. Before you can begin to develop *any* of the spiritual qualities that are described in these verses, there must be a time in your life when you cross over from spiritual death (separation from God) to spiritual life (a relationship with God). The Bible calls this being “saved,” or “born again.” The only way that the impassable gulf between you and God can be gotten over is by placing your complete trust and dependence in the Lord Jesus Christ. He *is* the Way of salvation. He is the Bridge between us and God the Father!

Read John 5:24.

Should you be trusting in anyone or anything other than Jesus Christ to get you to heaven, then I am here to wake you up this morning, and to tell you that you are lost, and tottering over the brink of hell! Jesus warned repeatedly of hell; and He said that the only way to pass from death unto life by believing on Him. What does it mean to “believe on Him”? It means to place your complete confidence in a message called “The Gospel.”

From the start of Jesus’ ministry, He warned people that in order to see the Kingdom of God, you must believe “the Gospel.” **Mark 1:15** tells us that as Jesus began to preach in Galilee, He told the people, “*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel*” (**Mark 1:15**). The word “Gospel” literally means “good news.” And what is the “good news”? Paul answers that question very simply and clearly in **1 Corinthians 15**.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-4.

The Gospel is, first of all, the message that **Christ died** for our sins. On the cross, Christ paid the full punishment for our sin, and left nothing for us to pay. Secondly, the Gospel is the message that **Christ was buried** (thus proving that He was truly dead), and that **He arose** bodily from the dead on the third day. By rising from the grave, Christ “sealed the deal.” By His resurrection, Christ guaranteed that everyone who simply believes on Him, and places his full confidence in His death and resurrection, will be saved. The moment a person stops trusting in His own righteousness, and instead trusts in Christ’s death and resurrection, he is raised from spiritual death to a new life in Christ; *and*, he is given the sure promise that one day he will receive a sinless, resurrected body, fit for heaven.

Have you placed your faith in Christ? I’m not asking, “Do you accept the facts about who Jesus is, and what He did on the cross?” I’m asking, “Have you, in your heart, truly *turned to Him*, and *believed on Him*?” You see, real faith (the kind that saves you) cannot be separated from **repentance**. (Remember what Jesus said: “**Repent ye**, and believe the gospel.”) A faith that is not linked to repentance is a dead, lifeless faith. To “repent” does *not* mean to try to work for, or to earn, your salvation. It simply means “to turn in your heart to Christ, from sin.” It means “to be sorry for sin.” It means “to be so genuinely broken about your sin, that you are willing to give your life over to Christ, so that He can take your sin away, and make you a new person.” Have you ever truly turned from your sin? If you claim to have placed your faith in Jesus, yet there has never been a change in your heart, then you have not truly been saved. The Bible says, “*Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new*” (**2 Corinthians 5:17**).

In a Baptist publication named *Sharpened Arrows*, a young Romanian lady named Lidia-Maria Mondoc tells her own salvation story. (Lidia-Maria grew up in a Christian home in Blaj, Romania, and is the daughter of a Baptist pastor.) This is her story:

“I was born into a Christian family, and I was taken to church for as long as I can remember. Many years passed, and church and spiritual things became a routine to me. I was there serving, singing, praying, **yet I was unsaved**. I had no passion. I became indifferent. But just after I turned 18, one night my dad came to me and asked, ‘Lidia, when do you plan to **repent**?’” I couldn’t believe, and I didn’t understand, why he was

asking me such a question! I had always been involved in the ministry (sometimes willingly, sometimes forced by my parents), and my whole life revolved around the church; and now my dad was asking me this? In my mind, I knew something wasn't right. Either something was wrong with me, or with my dad. But his question was just like cold rain coming over me; and suddenly, my sleepy conscience awoke. I realised (that) I am just a sinner who needs Christ's salvation, and that nothing else can help me—not the relationship my family members have with God, or the years I'd spent in church. Then a fearful thought penetrated my mind in those few seconds: if the Lord were to command my heart to stop beating right now, I would go to hell, because the Lord is not the Lord of *my* life. I bowed my knee before the Lord with a mind so clear, and a broken heart, convinced that I urgently needed Christ in my life. I prayed, asking Him to forgive my sins and to live in my life forever.”

My friend, I would ask you: “Are you really saved?” Is your faith in Jesus Christ a true faith, or a dead faith? If you're not sure, you'd better get it settled. Hell is extremely real; and it is forever! Paul urged the church members of Corinth (who were all *supposed* to be saved) to “***examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith***” (2 Corinthians 13:5). In other words: “Make sure you have real, saving faith! Make sure you're really saved!”

The Christian life begins when one places his faith in Christ for salvation. However, this is just the beginning! The new Christian now needs **faith for daily Christian living**. The Bible says that “***The just shall live by faith***.” Now, we who are saved are nothing but sinners saved by God's grace; and many times, our faith is weak. Our faith often fails, and we do stumble and fall. However, there should be a discernible pattern of faith in a Christian's life. In fact, as we grow in the Lord, faith should become the dominant characteristic in our lives. Trust in God's promises should be the Christian's way of living. Let's see how Paul described faith.

Read Hebrews 10:38 – 11:2.

In this passage, Paul is contrasting those who have faith to those who do not truly have faith. Those who have made a *profession* of faith in Christ, yet who “***draw back***” from their profession when persecution arises, and never return, were never truly saved. They are still lost, and bound for “***perdition***” (eternal destruction). On the other hand, the “***just***” (those who are saved), “***live by faith***.” For those who are truly saved, faith is not a one-off thing; it is a *continual way of living*. True faith *will* persevere, even if one must face persecution or *death* for the name of Christ! (For the people to whom Paul was writing, that is exactly what they were facing; and for aught we know, it may be what *we* will have to face one day, too!)

Now, look at what else Paul says about faith. First, Paul says that “***faith is the substance of things hoped for***.” That word “***substance***” is translated from the word *hupostasis*, which has the idea of a “foundation” of a building. Now, think about that! Paul says that faith is the “foundation” for everything that we “hope” for. Yet, in **Hebrews 6:19**, Paul says that *Christ Himself* is our “***hope***.” If *faith* be the very foundation of everything we hope for, and if *Christ Himself* be our Hope, then that means that our hope is not so much in the promises as it is in the *One who gave* us the promises! Everything that we hope for rests upon Christ! The reason that we can hope in Christ's promises is that we are hoping and resting in *Him!*

Now, look at what Paul says next. He also says that faith is *“the evidence of things not seen.”* Faith isn’t the evidence of things that are “seen”; it is the evidence of things that are *“not seen.”* What Paul is saying is that faith is not based upon empirical or physical evidence, but rather upon the conviction of God’s promises in the Scriptures. Faith is a gift from God; and it is the ability to see that which is invisible. Though we cannot see God’s promises with our physical eyes, His promises are more solid than the Rock of Gibraltar. The earth may shake and tremble; and even the Rock of Gibraltar will crumble one day; but God’s Word, and His promises, will never fail.

How strong is your faith, Christian? God wants you to move from *“faith to faith.”* He wants you to trust Him not only with your soul’s salvation, but with your money, your possessions, your marriage, your childrearing, your relationships, your job, your commitments, your service to God, your witness to the lost, and in every area of your life. He wants you to trust Him when the storms of life are raging. Likewise, He wants you to trust Him when the sea of life is calm. (Actually, this is the *hardest* time to trust Him, because we can easily fool ourselves into thinking that we have “everything under control”!) The child of God should not be looking for things that are *“seen,”* but for things that *“are not seen.”*

Read 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.

Now, let’s return to **Hebrews 11**. This chapter has often been called “The Hall of Faith.” In this passage, Paul gives us many examples of men and women who lived by faith. Yet, interestingly enough, every single person that is mentioned in this chapter lived in **Old Testament times**. Paul does not refer to even one saint who had lived or died from the time that Christ began His ministry. Why is that? Because Paul wanted his Jewish readers to see that faith has *always* been the lifestyle of God’s people—both in Old Testament and New Testament times!

Now, Old Testament saints did not have many of the privileges that we have today. They didn’t have the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit, as we do. They didn’t have the privilege of being able to look *back* to the cross and the empty tomb of Jesus, and to see exactly how God’s plan of salvation played out. However, they were saved the same way that we are saved today: by faith. They lived their daily lives the same way we must live—by faith. Like us, they had to trust in things they could not see. They never saw the fulfilment of the promise of Messiah’s coming to earth. However, they clung to the promise that the Messiah *would* come one day. They hoped in what they could not see. Think of old Abraham. It was impossible for him and Sarah to have children at their age; yet, they kept believing God. They waited 25 long years until God finally came through on His promise, and gave them a child, in defiance of nature!

Read Hebrews 11:8-13.

Christian, are you living your life more by faith, or by sight? Make no mistake about it: you cannot develop any of these other spiritual qualities in your life until you start really growing in faith. You’ve trusted Christ for your salvation; and in doing so, you trusted Him with your whole life. Your whole life belongs to Him. Are you willing to trust Him more?

II. The next step: Virtue

(Read verse 5 again.) After the foundation of faith, the first thing that the Lord commands Christians to add to their faith is “*virtue*.” Now, what is “virtue”? Virtue means “courage,” “valour,” or “manliness.” It has the idea of “standing for what is right, even if you must suffer for it.” It means, “standing for the truth, even if I’m the last man standing.”

Now, in our prosperous Western world, weak, lukewarm, milk toast, fair-weather, non-committal Christianity is the order of the day. This kind of Christianity makes God ill. God told the Laodicean Christians that He would “spew them out of His mouth,” because they were lukewarm. Yet, this is the kind of Christianity is characteristic of many Christians, and of many churches, today. Why is it this way? Because many Christians have allowed their faith and their passion for God to be stunted by the love of *material wealth and prosperity*. The more we pursue money and things, the less we love God, and think about the things of God. That is exactly why Paul gave the following advice to Timothy, and to the church of Corinth.

Read 1 Timothy 6:6-12.

Read 2 Timothy 2:3-4.

Read 1 Corinthians 16:13.

You may have noticed, as we were reading **1 Corinthians 16:13**, that there is a direct link between faith and courage. If a Christian be “standing fast in the faith,” then he will also “quit himself like a man, and be strong.” In other words, he’ll have courage! A Christian who is *standing fast* in what he believes will not swerve from his post! He will have *virtue*. Virtue is the natural outgrowth of true faith. If you really believe that God means what He says, then you will be willing to stand fast in that belief, and endure hardness, like a soldier.

I remember, with shame, a time in my early 20’s when I swerved from my post—when I was lacking in virtue. As I was going through my training at Bible College, I was required to do a summer internship at my home church, under the supervision of my pastor. I was assigned to help Mr. Carter, our church’s Junior Church superintendent, with the teaching. Every other Sunday, I was entrusted with the responsibility of teaching the kids in the 6 to 12-year age bracket.

Well, a few weeks into that summer, I happened to remember, as I was *en route* to church one morning, that this was my week to teach the kids’ lesson: and I had nothing prepared! As I walked downstairs to the kids’ classroom, I was feverishly compiling verses and an outline in my mind. I did come up with a lesson; but the kids were visibly bored. I was ill-prepared, and had no visuals or object lessons to keep their attention, or to drive home what I was saying. Mr. Carter seemed to be a little upset; but he didn’t say much. Well, the next few weeks went by without incident; but then, in about the middle of the summer, I got it into my head that I needed to go and see a college friend of mine who had just graduated, and who was about to get married and begin a position as assistant pastor at a church four hours from where I lived. It was the last chance I would have to see him for quite a while; and the only days I had off work that week were Saturday and Sunday. So, I packed for the weekend trip; and just before I was ready to head out the door that Saturday morning, I rang Mr. Carter to let him know that

I “couldn’t” teach the next morning. I quickly assured him that he didn’t need to worry, because I had already asked another brother in the church to fill in for me.

However, Mr. Carter’s response was not what I had hoped. In a word, it *wasn’t* O.K. Brother Carter informed me that it was my duty to be there, prepared and on time, and to teach those precious children about Jesus Christ. It was *my* job; and if I didn’t show up, he would no longer assist me with fulfilling the requirements for my internship. Now, this news did make me pause for a few hours to consider what to do. I weighed it carefully in my mind; but I ended up concluding that visiting my friend was more important. I went to visit my friend at his church that weekend; and, true to his word, Mr. Carter relieved me from my position. Now, I did manage to find other ways to fulfil my obligations for the internship that summer; and, for a time, I soothed my conscience with all kinds of reasonable-sounding justifications for the decision that I had made. However, as time passed, and I grew more in the Lord, I came to realise that Mr. Carter was right. At the time, I *thought* I had been ill-used; but it was I who was wrong. I chose not to submit to my authority, Mr. Carter. More importantly, I had not submitted to the Lord. I *did* have a job to do for God; and by not showing up, I was telling the Lord, “I’ll serve you when it’s convenient for me.” I’m thankful to Mr. Carter for giving me a kick in the backside and effectively saying, “Hey, Bible college student, put your faith to practice! Quit you like a man, and be faithful to your post! Get some virtue!”

Virtue is doing what is right, when no one else (or scarcely anyone else) will stand with you. If you are determined to stand fast in your faith, and to exercise virtue, you can expect to be abandoned by some unsaved friends, and even by other Christians, at times. You can also expect to receive little (if any) thanks for your service to God. However, of this you may be sure: you are laying up reward in heaven!

Christian young people, will you purpose in your heart to stand for what’s right, and to be a witness to your friends at school, even if they make fun of you? Christian adult, will you determine to put God first in your marriage, in your finances, in your witness at the job, and in your duties at church, even if it be inconvenient and time-consuming, and even if it should cause misunderstandings in your relationships with others? As a pastor, I must take such stands, as well. I must resolve to stand for every doctrine and precept of this Book, no matter what the fallout may be. If I were concerned about having bigger numbers, and lots of money coming into the offering box, I wouldn’t insist on standing for those “hard sayings” of God’s Word. I would preach nice, smooth, easy things, and not get into those controversial, touchy doctrines and practices that reach down to where people live. If I were to take “the easy way,” we probably would have many more people attending this church. However, such a church wouldn’t really be a New Testament church: it would merely be a community club.

Christian, God demands that we add to our faith *virtue*. Will *you* have courage, valour, and manliness? Will you be like Daniel, who refused to break God’s dietary laws, even though his life was at stake, and even though all the other Jewish young men around him (except for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) were abandoning their faith in Jehovah? Will you be like Stephen, who, during his trial, boldly declared that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah—even though he knew that it would cost him his life? Will you be like Paul, who, when he was standing on trial before Nero, stood alone, with no advocate to plead his cause, and fearlessly preached the Gospel, even though all the other Christians in Rome had abandoned him?

Read 2 Timothy 4:16-17.

Conclusion: Christian, is it your heart's desire to move on to "higher ground"? Are you growing in your faith every day? Are you adding to your faith virtue? Are you determined to do what's right, no matter what the cost? Should your faith be wavering, or should your virtue be weak, ask the Lord to increase your faith and virtue, and to make you fruitful for Him! I would also ask the question, "**Are you saved?**" A head full of knowledge can't save you, my friend. You *must* personally repent of your sin and trust in Christ to save you. "***The just shall live by faith.***" You may look and act like a Christian; but if there be no true, saving faith in your heart, you do not know Christ. Don't be among those who make a false profession of faith in Christ, and who will one day draw back unto everlasting perdition! Believe on Christ today, to the saving of your soul! He is ready and willing to save you. The Scripture says, "***For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.***"