

Week 3: What do you really want from God?

God I want some action, now.

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne February 15, 2009

Intro to the lesson: Week by week here at church I pray for God to show up. I ask God to act, to heal, to forgive, to guide, to do all sorts of things. That's what makes prayer something more than just talking to yourself or rationalizing things. I pray for God to act. At the same time, I try to be patient when he does not, but that doesn't stop me from asking again and again for God's help. That's something else we want from God. So far in this message series we've looked at two other requests: There are those times when you turn to God and want answers. Only I don't think it's so much answers you're seeking, as to know God is there. When I experience God's presence I no longer need answers. Then there are times when you want God's attention, only there too, it's not his attention you need so much as assurance that he knows you and cares about you. Well, this week we're looking at those times when each of us asks God to do something specific, to act in some special way to change things that are wrong, or maybe heal someone who is sick. Only here too, it's not so much that one action we're looking for. We're looking for something else. I think there's a time when each soul looks for some proof. That goes not only for people who still seeking for God without any real faith, it's also true for people who have met God. Like these guys who had been close to Jesus. Even they had their doubts and wanted proof:

Reading from Matthew 14:25-32

About three o'clock in the morning Jesus came to the Twelve, walking on the water. When his disciples saw Jesus, they screamed in terror, thinking he was a ghost. But Jesus spoke to them at once. "It's all right," he said. "I am here! Don't be afraid." Then Peter called to him, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you by walking on water." "All right, come," Jesus said. So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. But when he looked around at the high waves, he was terrified and began to sink. "Save me, Lord!" he shouted. Instantly Jesus reached out his hand and grabbed him. "You don't have much faith," Jesus said. "Why did you doubt me?" When they climbed back into the boat, the wind stopped. [NLT]

Reflection: Of course along with his share of doubts, you can say something else for Peter. At least he had the faith to get up and get out of the boat. The other eleven did not. Some folk make fun of Peter for sinking, you know, for his lack of faith. But at least he got up and got out of the boat. He took a risk. His trust in Jesus was greater than his fear of the storm.

Check this out: he also trusted in Jesus even before he had the proof he was looking for. And that makes me wonder. How many times has Jesus called out to me, and I have been simply too busy to hear him? How often has Jesus called on me to take a risk and trust in him, only for me to say, "You know Jesus, this boat sure seems a lot safer and drier. Can't I just stay here and then you can come to meet me here?" No. God doesn't work that way. Faith implies taking a risk, trusting in someone when you don't have all the proof. You can't just sit back and wait. Faith steps out. Or as that great theologian Wayne Gretzky has said, "You miss 100% shots you never take." How true. To find out how much faith you really have you need to act on faith, before you have it. What you and I need to do is to stop asking God for proof, because the proof comes through leaving the safety of life as it is to discover the adventure of doing life with Jesus. I believe in each day, in every week of your life, there are moments when Jesus stands in front of you and says: "What are you waiting for? Come follow me." Following when he says "Go" may mean jumping out of the boat, or jumping into the fire, but that's where the action is. Because that's where Jesus is. When I don't get up and get going, I miss out on so much, I miss Jesus. So will you get up and go? How about now for instance?

Song: If you say "Go"

*If you say go, we will go, if you say wait, we will wait
If you say step out on the water
And they say it can't be done
We'll fix our eyes on you and we will come
Your ways are higher than our ways
And the plans that you have laid are good and true
If you call us to the fire you will not withdraw your hand
We'll gaze into the flames and look for you*

Intro to reading and reflection: Well another Valentine's Day has just come and gone, and along with it that always difficult job of picking just the right gift to give someone you love. Do you get a card for your wife ... or a card and flowers, or a card and flowers sent to her workplace. Or what about one of those little stuffed bears they advertize on TV? For guys the choices are hard to make and the landscape filled with landmines. Chocolates are fattening, lingerie can send the wrong message. In this economic climate if you go to *Jarred's* your valentine may be upset you spent all that money for jewelry. The problem inherent in Valentine's Day is this: How do you prove your love for someone else? Every year

guys struggle to understand which gift offers enough proof, without being too much, which one shows you care but didn't spend too much and you aren't expecting too much in return? You know, if guys were better at this they would give up, go home and clean the oven and do the ironing. Now that would be real proof of love right there.

When it comes to God, what kind of proof do you want that God is here or that he loves you? Well, what kind of proof would be acceptable? As we've been discussing Friday nights at *The Spirit Cafe*, it all depends where you start. Some folk, I believe, would not accept any proof of God whatsoever. Richard Dawkins in his book *The God Delusion* explains at great length why he believes there are no proofs of God's existence. In his book the only proofs that count are those for Darwin's theories. You quickly realize that even if there were some miraculous, ironclad proof of God's existence he would not accept it simply because he believes proofs of God can not exist. And if they can't exist, well then, they don't. So there. Hardly a convincing proof from a scientist. He misses the point entirely that using science to find proof of God is like boiling water to make ice cubes. It doesn't work that way. Faith can not be proven, which is what, by definition, we mean by taking something on faith. After all, what is faith? The Bible explains: "*Faith is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see.*" [Hebrews 11:1 NLT] Can't see. Go figure.

Well no. You can't go figure when it comes to faith. The whole point of having faith is saying you are ready to accept something that can not be proven. I guess whether or not you see God at work in your life all comes down to where you're looking. Science relies on observation and experimentation. Science goes by the saying "*seeing is believing*," and, that's the only way to know something. You have to see it, test it, prove it, define it, explain it, chart it and then repeat it. But to quote the old church lady from Saturday Night Live we could say, "*Well, isn't that special.*" Only God doesn't play that game. Not even if you ask him to. God does not offer proof. For those who do not allow the possibility of God or miracles, no proof would ever be good enough anyway. Why bother? Many times the religious leaders of his day tested Jesus. They wanted proof. Only Jesus did not play that game

Reading from Mark 8:11-12

When Jesus and the Twelve arrived, the Pharisees came out and started in on him, badgering him to prove himself ... Provoked, he said, "Why does this generation clamor for miraculous guarantees? If I have anything to say about it, you'll not get so much as a hint of a guarantee." [The Message]

Well he did have something to say about it. Still does. Folks, if you got guarantees you'd have no need for faith. And if you are asking for guarantees, I promise you, you'll be disappointed. God does not work according to the "*seeing is believing*" format. He works on a "*believing is seeing*" one. For those who

have eyes to see what God is doing, his ways become clear. Science can't accept that. But there it is just the same ...

Scientists and psychologists would call this a delusion, or just wishful thinking. You want to see some proof of God, and poof, there it is. Now that would make sense if it were not for one simple experience. My faith has rarely meant I got what I asked for. You know when you play the card game "*Go Fish*" you ask for a card. "*Do you have any threes?*" If the other player has some, they give them to you because you asked, and then, you get to go again. Well, if prayer worked the same way, I would have given up long ago. I rarely, get exactly what I ask for or what I wish for. God knows better than to grant my prayers just the way I want. God does not grant me wishes like a genie in a bottle. God does not reward me with what I want whenever I have been good enough, like Santa. God cares enough about me to provide what I need, not what I want. And he knows the

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best time and place to answer my prayers. So I have not given up asking God for help. I have, however, given up asking for signs. I'm prepared to accept the blessings God offers even when they weren't exactly what I had in mind. I guess that's where faith has lead me ... to trust God more than my own desires. And I'm really OK with that.

"*Believing is seeing*" is simply another way of saying that to grow in faith, you have to act on your faith. But get this, you have to act on your faith even before you have it. Sounds odd right? If you are waiting to get proof before you act you will never get anywhere. That just sounds stubborn to me, like saying you don't mind following God once he has fulfilled your checklist of proofs and promises. Yeah right. Like that works. Having faith means learning how to give up trying to be in control of the universe and trust someone else. It's not such a bad deal, folks. I've found the real adventure of life began when I took Jesus up on his invitation, when I let him be in charge of the universe. The adventure starts like your faith, when you get out of the boat and try to walk across the water. You know for a fact it's a risky thing to do, and it makes no sense, but in faith you choose to trust Jesus who says, "*Come.*" You know for instance it's a risky thing to do to turn the other cheek or to forgive someone. You know it can be risky to offer your help, and it's almost silly to think about giving away your money to support ministry when money is so very tight now, but faith leads to risks. It also leads to God. You see God doesn't want to leave you where you are, he wants you to get up and get going. Only then can you draw closer to him. Let me explain how:

(1) Start now. The first thing to do is to start, not to wait for later. Listen up, you don't need to wait for further instructions. You don't need some new sign that says go. God has already given you the green light. As someone told me once when I was sitting at a red light, and I had missed that it had turned

green: "Go already. The light doesn't get any greener than that." God has already given you permission to go out, get started. Too often I find Christians who are praying for a sign before they will do something. Sound familiar? You want a sign, some proof you're doing the right thing, before you do it. Only God has already given you an invitation to get out of the boat. The Bible is full of challenges to go out, serve your neighbor, love your enemy, turn the other cheek, pray constantly, welcome the stranger, do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God each and every day. It doesn't get any greener than that folks. Those aren't just some old and cold Bible verses. Those are your personal instructions for the week ahead. Folks, the next step is not God's, it's yours. Start today.

(2) Step Out. Step two is to step out of the comfort zone. As we say around here you can't be a Christ Follower if all you're doing is sitting still. Once God has invited you to step out in faith, he waits to see if you will be obedient. You don't get blessed for sitting there. There are no prizes for inaction. God blesses you on your way. One of my favorite Bible stories is about Moses. God told him to step forward and lead the people of Israel through the Red Sea. But when he got to the water's edge he stopped. He didn't get it. Though Pharaoh's army was riding down on them, though they seemed to be trapped, Moses stood still and waited for God. Only that wasn't God's plan at all. God wanted them to move forward, to step out in faith, not to stand still. Moses blew it:

You want a sign before you follow God? God has already given you an invitation to get out of the boat to love your neighbor, turn your cheek, serve the needy, forgive and to walk humbly with your God ... The light doesn't get any greener than that folks.

Reading from Exodus 14:13-15

Moses told the people, "Don't be afraid. Just stand where you are and watch the Lord rescue you. The Egyptians that you see today will never be seen again. The Lord himself will fight for you. You won't have to lift a finger in your defense!" But the Lord said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the people to get moving!"

[NLT]

God confirms your faith with his actions. Step out and God makes things happen. Stand back and wait, and you'll be waiting a long time. Moses was told to move forward. I wonder if he took a few steps into the water and stopped. Or did he go further than that? At what point did God show his power? If you were walking out into the deep water, would you keep walking and trust in God's promise to go with you? Or would you turn back? Would you go up to your ankles, or keep going up to your knees, would you think of turning back when it got too deep, or would you trust God and keep moving? Have you already? Friends, have you stopped stepping forward in faith because things didn't seem to be going the way you wanted? It can happen so easily. A little personal disappointment here or there and you stop trusting in God. The doctor has some bad news for you and it stops you in your tracks. You stop

seeing the proof of God's love and you stop believing, forgetting that believing leads to seeing. I know about that, I've been there too. It can be hard to keep moving forward when you start losing your faith. Maybe you're there this morning, your marriage or your career are in a rut. You have lost hope. Only remember that while God may not act to prove things for you ahead of time, he will act to confirm your faith as you move ahead. As the Bible puts it, we Christ Followers "*walk by faith and not by sight.*" As a more modern translation puts it: *That's why we live with such good cheer. You won't see us drooping our heads or dragging our feet! Bad conditions here don't get us down ... It's what we trust in but don't yet see that keeps us going. Do you suppose a few ruts in the road or rocks in the path are going to stop us?* [2 Corinthians 5:6-8 The Message] I keep moving because God is in front of me and he's inviting me forward. If I want to have a stronger faith I need to keep moving. Indeed, that's what the church saw in its first days after Jesus left them to step out into all the world. Jesus told them to go, not stay:

Reading from Mark 16:15-18, 20

Jesus told them, "Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone, everywhere ... These signs will accompany those who believe: They will cast out demons in my name, and they will speak new languages. They will be able to handle snakes with safety, and if they drink anything poisonous, it won't hurt them. They will be able to place their hands on the sick and heal them." And the disciples went everywhere and preached, and the Lord worked with them, confirming what they said by many miraculous signs. [NLT]

Notice the signs accompany those who believe. Not those who seek signs. So before you start picking up snakes and drinking poison, remember if you do those things on purpose to test God or to prove something to yourself, you better have 911 on your speed dial. God confirms faithful living not fake religious pretensions. God goes with you when you step out in faith, even when you don't have a lot of faith to start with. I believe it's only then you can see what God is doing in you and around you. Demanding proof doesn't do it, because believing leads to seeing God.

Still I know there will be those times in life when you want proof, when something so horrendous has happened that you need proof or else your faith will dry up. Patch Adams played by Robin Williams in this clip, gets close to the brink after a close friend of his is murdered. He stands at the edge of a cliff and argues with God. That's something you can only do when you have enough faith to think God is there to start with. He wants answers, he demands God's attention, he wants proof that God is not some uncaring thing.

Insert clip from Patch Adams here

At the end of that clip you see a butterfly land on Patch. Then his face changes. You may have only seen a butterfly, but he saw something else there. The friend who had died had talked about wanting to be a butterfly so she could be free. In this Patch sees something more than any scientist or skeptic would see. He reads into it an answer from God, a confirmation from God that God was there, even in tragedy or anger. Because believing leads to seeing God's mercy even in the dark times. Or in the ordinary and everyday. How good are you at seeing God when he is present in your day? Or hearing his invitation to step out in faith? How much are you missing in each moment? My friends, there is a wonder in the here and now if only you believe:

Solo: Miracle of the Moment

words and music by Steven Curtis Chapman

*It's time for letting go all of our if only's
'cause we don't have a time machine
And even if we did would we really want to use it?
Would we really want to go change everything?
'cause we are who and where and what we are for now
And this is the only moment we can do anything about
So breathe it in and breathe it out, listen to your heartbeat
There's a wonder in the here and now,
It's right there in front of you
And I don't want you to miss the miracle of the moment
There's only one who knows what's really out there waiting
In all the moments yet to be and all we need to know
Is he's out there waiting to him the future's history
And he has given us a treasure called right now
And this is the only moment we can do anything about
So breathe it in and breathe it out, listen to your heartbeat
There's a wonder in the here and now
It's right there in front of you
And I don't want you to miss the miracle of the moment
And if it brings you tears then taste them as they fall
And let them soften your heart, and if it brings you laughter
Then throw your head back and let it go, let it go ...*

In the week ahead there will be ordinary everyday moments when you could step out in faith. In those moments, Jesus will challenge you to step forward and act out your faith, and that will happen before your faith becomes stronger. Jesus stretches you by inviting you not to seek safety but to seek God. So maybe you'll be faced with forgiving someone who doesn't deserve it at work. Or maybe you'll look for ways to show your love to someone whether or not they return it to you the way you want. Maybe you'll step out in faith and pray for someone else, or listen to someone who is in need or even talk about your faith with someone who is down rather than rush by them because you're too busy to stop or you might not know the right thing to say. So what. Step out. Jesus is in front of you inviting you forward. That's why next Sunday we're giving you a special moment in time to recommit yourself in some way to following Jesus day by day. Whether or not you get out of the boat is up to you. Just like at this point whether or not your faith grows is up to you, and whether you will seek more for answers and attention and proof from God, or whether you will simply seek God himself.

Song: Whenever I see your face

*Whenever I see your face then all of my fears can fly
Whenever I clearly hear the times when I ask you why
Whenever I feel your arms, whenever you hold me close
For then I will see your face as I am found in you
Now the heavens can be home for my spirit has been freed
And my soul it rests in you, your life is found in me
And this death it ends in life with this faith in love fulfilled
And my eyes will finally see your face
Lead me to know you more and help me to understand
You cause me to see in faith all of your dreams and plans
For faith is perfected now in living and loving you
In hope never wavering completely found in you
Now the heavens can be home for my spirit has been freed
And my soul it rests in you, your life is found in me
And this death it ends in life with this faith in love fulfilled
And my eyes will finally see your face*