

Just a note at the outset ... this is not the sermon I was planning to write

- it has been that kind of week!  
however I have managed to put together some thoughts on growth and faith leading on from our Bible study on "living in growth"

Now it seems that the church in Thessalonica had sent a message to Paul

- these are very new followers of Jesus who were now found themselves facing a severe challenge to their commitment in the form of persecution
- they were concerned that their faith might not be sufficient and wondering how they would cope:  
would they be up to scratch, make the grade, pass the test?

Paul replies very wisely in this second letter

- he does not push them further into depression by pessimistically agreeing with them
- rather he notes their virtues and achievements in such a way that these despondent, frightened Christians might stand tall and say:  
"Well if that's what Paul thinks of us, we'll get through this yet"

Faith it seems is something that does not stand still, is not static

- it is either growing or diminishing  
Paul astutely encourages the followers in Thessalonica by admiring their faith and noting how it is an example to others
- in verses 3 and 4 he writes:

*My dear friends, we always have good reason to thank God for you, because your faith in God and love for each other keep growing all the time. That's why we brag about you to all God's churches. We tell them how patient you are and how you keep on having faith, even though you are going through a lot of trouble and suffering.*

As it said in the introduction to this week's Bible study:

[Paul] encourages them to keep moving forward in their faith. Faith is a relationship, and so it can live, grow and develop. We do not simply "have it" or "not have it". It grows through suffering, and suffering for God is evidence that glory will follow. Slowly but surely, the gap between what we are and what we shall be is narrowed through God's work in our life as he "counts us worthy" through Christ.

Paul's words are an encouragement and a challenge to us as a church today

- is our faith an example to others?  
are we growing in faith in our life as followers of Jesus?
- I invite you to reflect on this as I share with you some of my thinking on "faith"  
it comes from my 'Real Bloke Meets God' series ...

These are stories about a 'ordinary kiwi bloke' who has the disturbing experience of God bursting into his life. This bloke is probably not a regular church-goer, though he has a background in Sunday School. One day God just was there unannounced and uninvited in this ordinary bloke's lounge. He and the Lord God have gone on to have some interesting conversations on all sorts of topics and have developed quite a relationship. Here is how I had them help me reflect on "faith":

## Faith?

“Are We Losing Our Faith?” was the headline in huge letters on the cover of one of those women’s magazines Patti sometimes read. “Are we losing our faith”? It seemed a reasonable question in this technologically and scientifically advanced twenty-first century.

Losing faith in what though? What is “faith” anyway and what might cause us to lose it? Those were definitely good questions. Good questions for Patti, not for me. She was the “thinker”, the “philosopher” – I was more your typical practical bloke. That kind of stuff gave me a headache. Give me a western or a car magazine any day!

Still, as I sat in my favourite armchair drinking a cup of real coffee and watching the dancing fire on a cool winter evening ... I got to wondering about this “faith”. The big thing with “faith” was of course its tie-in with religion. I wasn’t sure quite how that worked, but even I could see that in this ‘advanced’ twenty-first century religion wasn’t as important as it once had been. Not that I could speak with any real authority – yes, I went to Sunday School for a bit and then, well, nothing. Religion didn’t seem important or necessary. In fact I got on quite well without it and never even needed to think about “faith”.

Then one day the Lord God burst in on me and started talking to me like I was an old friend or something. Didn’t seem to require any faith at all on my part. It just happened. In the beginning it was annoying and distracting and I wished He wouldn’t do it. In fact it would have taken a great exercise of faith to say it couldn’t happen! But it did happen and it kept on happening. Still haven’t worked out why or how. Now though, truth be told, I actually kind of enjoyed it – not that I would tell the Lord.

So. Faith? I sipped my coffee and watched the fire some more. I didn’t have to have faith that God existed. I knew for sure he was around and involved. And I knew that he genuinely

seemed to want what was best for his people – at least as it related to me anyway. And I had faith in other important things too ...

I had faith that Patti loved me. Faith that my boys thought I was an alright Dad. I had faith that the sun would rise tomorrow morning. Faith that there was meaning and purpose to our existence. Faith that there was a whole world beyond my door. Heck, I even had faith that our Rugby Sevens team would win the gold medal at the Olympics!

“That may be more a misguided hope than faith,” came a familiar voice.

I looked up and there was the Lord sitting in the armchair across from me. “Do you know something about the Olympics?” I asked. As usual, if he did – and he probably did, he was saying nothing.

After a while I thought I had better say something. After all it’s probably not a good thing to ignore the One who created everything from nothing and could just as easily make nothing from everything. “Good evening Lord. Nice to have your company.” The Lord seemed to nod in that way of his. “What brings you here?”

“As usual,” the Lord responded, “you do.” He glanced at the magazine cover.

“Oh this?” I pointed. “Yes. I’ve been wondering ...”

“I know,” the Lord interrupted gently.

“Of course you do,” I said under my breath and waited, for the Lord was surely about to enlighten me with another of his pearls of wisdom.

“Faith is not such a difficult vexing thing as you make it out to be.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” I replied. “You’re God.”

“Why do you say that?” he seemed genuinely interested.

“Well it’s hard for us to even have faith that there is a God these days, let alone that we can have some sort of relationship with him.”

There was a thoughtful silence before the Lord said simply, “You managed.”

Before I could even think I just blurted out, “I didn’t ask for it. You just turned up!”

The Lord didn’t take issue with that but stopped me in my tracks by saying, “How do you know it’s not like that for everyone?”

“Really?” I was intrigued. But as usual the Lord would neither confirm nor deny. So I continued, “My mates at work don’t seem to have any idea about you or that they can talk to you like we are now.”

“Have you asked them?” was the Lord’s response. He had me there because of course I hadn’t. Time to get back to safer ground. “Even though I know you, and we talk and everything, I still don’t know about faith and how it works. There’s still so much I wonder about ...”

“Ask me,” was the Lord’s response.

“Yes but it’s not as easy as that.”

“And what makes you think it’s easy for me?”

“Well you’re God aren’t you!” I said.

“So?” was his response.

“You know everything. You can do anything. You can change things!”

“Yet I have such great faith in you, in human beings,” the Lord said, “that I choose to work through you.”

Uh-oh. I felt my mind stretching and it was not a comfortable feeling. The Lord God, Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer having faith in us, in fickle human beings! I gulped, as unobtrusively as I could. That was something that I had never even begun to consider ...

“And nor have most people,” the Lord continued in that disturbing way of his, picking up on my thoughts. “I have faith and keep my faith in human beings even though in this twenty-first century many people believe everything is dark and grim and you are on the brink of disaster.”

I couldn’t help but think that was exactly what the headline on Patti’s magazine was all about. And so far what the Lord had said wasn’t exactly helping me to see that things were any

different. But he hadn’t finished yet, so I thought I’d better hear him out. You never knew with the Lord – there just might be a test!

“In some ways it seems people have lost faith in themselves and in their fellow human beings. They have no faith in any external values so they put their faith in material things or having a good time or relationships ...”

“Excuse me for butting in,” I interrupted. It’s always risky doing that to the Lord but it had to be said. “This doesn’t exactly sound like good news. I’m sure I could have got all this from Patti’s magazine.”

“I am getting there if you will be so kind as to let me continue ...” he paused and I nodded. “Right then,” the Lord continued, “where was I ... in these continually changing and confusing times there is one thing that you can rely on. One thing that remains constant: I have faith in you.”

“Look at the world. Look at the TV news. Wars. Famine. Environmental abuse. Nations and peoples working against each other. Injustice. Countries and individuals who are selfish and uncaring. People being narrow and materialistic ... have you ever considered that it is no less difficult for me to have faith than for you? Don’t you think I have to have great faith not to send another flood, another Sodom and Gomorrah? Great faith to let things carry on and not wipe it all out and start again or not even bother; to give up on this corner of the universe?”

I hadn’t thought about it like that. The Lord God having faith in us. Faith in me.

“There,” he sounded rather self-satisfied, but not smug. “That’s got you thinking hasn’t it!”

I had to admit it had. It really had.

The Lord continued: “The Lord God Almighty, Creator of all that is and could be, mover of stars, ruler of thunder and lightning, shaper of mountains, keeper of seas; has faith in one husband and father of two!”

I was a bit overcome and could hardly get the words out, “You have faith in me?”

“Uh huh. That’s my faith for the twenty-first century. Same as it has been since the beginning of creation. Faith in the beings created in my image.”

It was more than mind stretching. It was mind blowing. I sat for a while just watching the flames in the fire. Utterly, totally mind blowing. The Lord God has complete faith in the beings created in his image. Us. Specifically me.

After a time the Lord turned and asked candidly, “So, who do you think has to have more faith: You? Or me?”

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Story: "Faith" (from A Real Bloke Meets God – 2)

[read story]

At the end of 2 Thessalonians 1 Paul's message ends with a most uplifting encouragement: *We pray for God's power to help you do all the good things that you hope to do and that your faith makes you want to do. Then, because God and our Lord Jesus Christ are so kind, you will bring glory to the name of our Lord Jesus, and he will bring glory to you.*

Bible scholar William Barclay notes:

"Here we have the breath-taking truth that our glory is Christ and Christ's glory is ourselves"

The glory of Jesus Christ is in those who through him

- have learned to endure and to conquer  
and to shine like lights in a dark place
- that is what Paul prayed for the members of the Thessalonian church  
and it is a prayer for us here today

The Lord God has faith in us – that is God's grace, God's gift

- what we do, how we live and love  
how we grow in faith
- is our gift to God  
and brings life and light to our world