

FAITHFULNESS

SERIES: FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT



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Galatians 5:22-23
Eighth Message
Dan Westman
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Galatians 5:22-23

The Old Faithful Geyser is in Yellowstone National Park. As the name suggests, Old Faithful is...faithful. It was named for its frequent and fairly predictable eruptions. Every 60-110 minutes, the geyser erupts for 1.5 to 5 minutes, spraying thousands of gallons of water over 100 feet into the air. What is amazing is that scientists can predict when the next eruption will happen based on the data of its past eruptions, and they can do that with a high degree of accuracy.

How faithful is Old Faithful, you ask? According to one expert, "It depends on what you call faithful." Here is why they say this geyser is faithful: "The famous geyser currently erupts around 20 times a day and can be predicted with a 90 percent confidence rate within a 10 minute variation."¹

What does it mean to be faithful? That is the question that we are going to ask this morning. What does it mean to be faithful? This is an important question for us because faithfulness is one of the virtues that appears in Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. We have been studying that list together this summer, considering these character traits that the Spirit is forming in those of us who are followers of Jesus.

Galatians 5:22-23:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

We have looked at six of these virtues so far, and today we will look at the seventh: faithfulness.

Faithfulness has to do with dependability. Old Faithful was named Old Faithful because it was dependable. Twenty times a day, that geyser is going to erupt. You can count on it. Every day. It is also predictable. By examining the data on how it has behaved in the past, you can predict with a high degree of accuracy when it will erupt next. In the world of geysers, faithfulness has to do with dependability and predictability.

What about in the Christian life? Faithfulness is a big world in the Bible. As we will see in our time together this morning, faithfulness is an attribute of God. God is faithful. And here, in the fruit of the Spirit, faithfulness is said to be something that is meant to be ours as well. Just as God is faithful, so, too, we are meant to be faithful. But what does that mean? Like the geyser, does it mean we explode with a high degree of dependability and predictability? Faithfulness, as a virtue, does have to do with dependability and predictability. But there is more that we can say about it. That is what we are going to explore together this morning.

Faith and faithfulness

It is important to note that the word that Paul uses for faithfulness is the same word that is usually translated as "faith." The Greek word is *pistis*, and it is used 22 times in the book of Galatians. Most of the time, it is translated as "faith." But faith and faithfulness are really just two sides of the same coin.

When used to mean faithfulness, the Greek word *pistis* means ["being someone in whom confidence can be placed."] Faithfulness is being someone in whom confidence can be placed.

Faith, on the other hand, is the ["believing on the basis of the reliability of the one trusted."] I have faith in you because you are reliable—two sides of the same coin.

On the drive to Camp PBC a few weeks ago, my family and I stopped at the Shasta Caverns, a limestone cave in the mountains next to Shasta Lake. The cave was full of crystal structures of all different kinds: stalactites, stalagmites, something called flow crystal, and my new personal favorite: the splattermite. Look it up. It looks like a brain.

The cave was pretty big, so I never felt claustrophobic. But at the end of the tour, our tour guide asked us how safe we thought the caves were. As I looked up at all of these massive crystal formations above me, I thought, *I sure hope it's safe!* She then drew our attention to a large stalactite that hung from the top of the cave above us.

This stalactite was about 4 feet long and weighed several tons. That is a heavy piece of rock hanging above my head! The tour guide continued to tell us that a stalactite grows at the rate of one inch per 100 years. Given that this stalactite was 4 feet long, it had been hanging on the roof of that cave for somewhere around 4800 years. During that time, it has withstood who knows how many earthquakes and still it stood strong. The tour guide's point was this: it is safe to stand under that stalactite because that stalactite is *faithful*. It has been there for 4800 years, and it has never fallen. Not once. It is dependable and predictable. It always acts the same, and it is always there. And because of this, it is something in which confidence can be placed.

As I stood under that stalactite and learned how faithful it had been, I found myself having faith in it. I believed that it would not fall and crush me because it had proved itself to be reliable. The stalactite was faithful, and I had faith—two sides of the same coin.

In the fruit of the Spirit, we are told that the Spirit wants to grow us into people who are faithful like that stalactite. As with all of the other virtues listed in the fruit of the Spirit, this is not something we are supposed to drum up in ourselves. Rather, this is the work of the Spirit in taking something true of God and making it something true of us as well. God is faithful, and he has called us to be faithful as well.

The faithfulness of God

Let us consider the faithfulness of God together. There are countless stories in the Bible that speak to the faithfulness of God, but I want to take us to one of the psalms, Psalm 136. Psalm 136 is a psalm of thanksgiving rooted in God's faithfulness. Look at the first three verses.

Psalm 136:1-3:

- Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.**
**2 Give thanks to the God of gods,
for his steadfast love endures forever.**
**3 Give thanks to the Lord of lords,
for his steadfast love endures forever;**

We will see as we keep reading that this refrain, "for his steadfast love endures forever," will be repeated over and over and over again throughout this psalm. Every other line is "for his steadfast love endures forever." The word that is translated "steadfast love" is the Hebrew

word *hesed*. If you have been around church for a while, this is probably a word you have heard. It is one of the most, if not the most, important words used to describe God's relationship with his people. Sometimes it is translated "lovingkindness" or "mercy," but the most basic sense of this word is "loyal love." It is a word about faithfulness—primarily God's faithfulness to us. It is God's *hesed* that causes him to never give up on us. It is God's *hesed* that keeps him from abandoning us. It is God's *hesed* that causes him to bind himself to us and us to him in an unbreakable covenant of love. That is God's *hesed*.

In the remainder of the psalm, the psalmist will give thanks to God and praise him for the various ways that he has shown his *hesed*—his loyal love, his covenant faithfulness—to his people.

The first way that God has been faithful is through the very act of creation. We see this in verses 5-7.

Psalm 136:5-7:

- to him who by understanding made the
heavens,**
**6 to him who spread out the earth above
the waters,**
**7 to him who made the great lights,
for his steadfast love endures forever;**

Creation itself is a reminder of God's faithfulness. When we look at creation, it is meant to remind us of God's faithfulness. Think back to that giant stalactite in the Shasta Caverns. For 4800 years, it has hung in the same place. That is dependability. Or think of Old Faithful. Twenty times every day, that geyser will erupt without fail. That is predictability. That is faithfulness. God has designed the universe with faithfulness built into it so we can look at this world and know with confidence that the God who created Old Faithful is himself faithful. Creation is a reminder of the faithfulness of God.

God's faithfulness is seen in far more than just creation. God's faithfulness is also seen in his acts of redemption.

Psalm 136:10-14:

- to him who struck down the firstborn of
Egypt, for his steadfast love endures
forever;**
**11 and brought Israel out from among
them, for his steadfast love endures
forever;**

12 with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, for his steadfast love endures forever;
13 to him who divided the Red Sea in two, for his steadfast love endures forever;
14 and made Israel pass through the midst of it, for his steadfast love endures forever;

Here, the psalmist is looking to the event of the Exodus, when God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt in a miraculous fashion. God raises up Moses. He sends the ten plagues. He parts the Red Sea and saves his people. It is one of the most miraculous stories in all of Scripture. From that point forward, the people continue to look back to that event as a reminder of the faithfulness of God. As they remember God's faithfulness in the past, they are able to renew their faith and confidence in the present.

Here is the lesson that Psalm 136 is trying to teach: Because God is faithful, we can place our confidence in him. Do you remember the definitions of faith and faithfulness that I mentioned earlier? Faithfulness is being someone in whom confidence can be placed. Faith is believing on the basis of the reliability of the one trusted—two sides of the same coin. Because God is faithful, we can place our confidence in him.

That confidence comes by looking back at the ways that God has been faithful in the past so that we have good reason to believe that he will be faithful in the present and in the future as well.

George Muller was a missionary in England in the 1800s. Muller started and ran a network of orphanages that cared for thousands of orphaned children. As a rule, he did not ask for money but trusted God to provide what they needed to run the orphanages. In his journal, Muller recorded one event that became their Exodus moment. One morning, they had run out of money and food, and yet Muller had the children gather around the table with empty bowls and thank the Lord for what he was going to provide. After this prayer, there was a knock at the door. The baker was there because he wanted to drop off an unexpected gift of bread for the children. After the baker left, there was another knock. It was the milkman. His cart had broken down right in front of the orphanage, and he wanted to give his milk to the children so that he could fix his cart. This event and several similar events became Exodus moments for George Muller, his team, and those orphans. These events were moments when God showed his faithfulness in markable ways that

they could then look back on and know with confidence that God will be faithful in the present and the future because he has proved himself to the faithful in the past.

What are your Exodus moments? How have you seen God's faithfulness in the past? Maybe you struggle to see God's faithfulness in your life. Maybe you don't have any Exodus moments of your own. If that is the case, draw from the Exodus moments of George Muller. Draw from the Exodus moments of your brothers and sisters in this church. I guarantee you they are all around you. Or draw from the Exodus moments of the Bible itself. Look back at those stories. Recount those stories. Relive those stories. Let your confidence in the faithfulness of God grow stronger.

Called to faithfulness

Placing our confidence in God is one appropriate response to the faithfulness of God. But it is not the only appropriate response. Another way we are meant to respond to God's faithfulness is by emulating that faithfulness, duplicating that faithfulness in our own lives. As we consider the ways that God is faithful—the ways that God has shown his loyal love to us—we are also meant to learn something about what it would be for the Spirit to grow not just into people of faith but also into people of faithfulness.

Just as God is faithful, we are called to be faithful. The faithfulness of God serves as a model for us to learn what it would be like to be faithful, and this really is what faithfulness is about as a part of the fruit of the Spirit.

This call to faithfulness is played out on two different planes: We are called to be faithful to God, and we are called to be faithful to others.

First, let's consider faithfulness to God. To be faithful to God is to be loyal to him just as he has been loyal to you. As God has committed never to abandon us, God is also looking for a commitment from us never to abandon him.

Earlier this week, I had the opportunity to baptize one of our Summer Leadership Institute interns, Joy. God has been doing some incredible things in Joy's life over the past year, and she wanted to get baptized as a way to publicly affirm her commitment to Jesus. So on Thursday, we drove over to a pool with Joy and some of her friends, family, and the rest of our interns, and I asked her the same two questions I ask everyone before I baptize them: Do you believe in Jesus as your Lord and

Savior? And do you commit to following Jesus for your whole life? With a huge smile on her face, Joy said "yes," so I dunked her under the water.

That second question, "Do you commit to following Jesus for your whole life?" is a question about faithfulness. Do you intend to be faithful to God? Do you plan to stick with him, or will you abandon ship if life gets hard, faith begins to feel boring, or you just lose interest in God?

These are important questions for each of us to ask ourselves. Do you commit to being faithful to God? And if so, how do you plan to do that?

Sometimes it can be easy to coast our way through the Christian life. I put my faith in Jesus, but now I am just kind of along for the ride. I still come to church. I still hang out with my Christian friends. And that is honestly enough for me. The reality, however, is that the tide of our culture threatens to slowly move us away from God. If we try to coast our way through the Christian life, we will not naturally find ourselves growing closer to God. Rather, we will find ourselves drifting away from him. We will not find ourselves growing in love for God. Rather, we will find ourselves growing in love for ourselves.

In Romans 12, Paul tells us we are either being conformed to this world or transformed into the character of Christ. In Colossians 3, he says that we are either seeking the things of this world or the things of God. There is no neutrality in the Christian life. We are either moving towards God or away from him. So we need to make a commitment—an intentional decision—to seek God and stay close to him. This is what it means to be faithful to God. Just as God has been faithful to us, we must choose to be faithful to him.

Faithfulness has another dimension as well, that of being faithful to others. Remember, faithfulness is about being someone in whom others can place their confidence.

This dimension of faithfulness is also becoming rarer in our culture. People are becoming increasingly less willing to make commitments to one another. We see this in something as trivial as an invitation to dinner.

Hey, I'm having some friends over on Friday for dinner. I'd love to have you join if you can make it.

Yes, I think there is a definitely a chance that I might possibly be able to make it... if I don't get a better offer before then.

People don't say that last part, but you can tell when they mean it! People today are increasingly less willing to make, and to keep, commitments to each other.

We see this nowhere more clearly than we do in marriage. This fall, we have three couples from our Young Adult Fellowship who are getting married. For each of those couples, during the wedding ceremony, I will ask them this question, referring to their soon-to-be-spouse: Do you commit to love them, comfort them, honor and keep them, in sickness and in health, and, forsaking all others, be faithful to them as long as you both shall live?

That is a big question! It is a question that increasingly fewer people are willing to answer. Today, marriage rates in America are at the lowest levels that they have been since the government started keeping a record over 150 years ago. Not only that but many of the people who make that commitment will fail to keep it by committing adultery or getting a divorce.

I don't bring this up to make a point about marriage as much as I do to highlight a broader cultural trend: people today have a hard time making and keeping commitments. This really is the essence of faithfulness: making and keeping commitments. We have a hard time being faithful. But God has called us to be faithful. The Spirit wants to grow us into people who are dependable and who show up when we say we are going to show up. People who are there for people when they need us, regardless of whether it is convenient. People who stick with people even when the relationship gets difficult or even painful. This kind of faithfulness is radically countercultural, but this is what the Spirit wants to grow in us.

Faithfulness when faithfulness fails

When I was in college, I began to really wrestle with the idea of faithfulness. In high school, I don't think I was a very faithful friend, but in college, I really wanted to be a faithful and dependable friend. I started dating my wife Linzy in college, and I really wanted to be a dependable and reliable boyfriend and eventually spouse. But mostly, I wanted to be faithful to God. Honestly, I was worried that I would never be faithful in the way God wanted me to be. I looked at my life, and I saw so much sin. I saw so many idols—things that my heart longed for more than I longed for God. I looked at the many ways in which I felt I had let God down. I feared God might be faithful to me because I had not been faithful to him.

Do you ever feel that way? It is easy to feel that way sometimes. But God does not want us to feel that way. Look at what he says in 2 Timothy.

2 Timothy 2:11-13:

The saying is trustworthy, for:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;

12 if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us;

13 if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.

Notice here that there is a difference between denying Jesus and being faithless—or, we could say, unfaithful. Denying Jesus is to say that we no longer believe in him. It is to say that he is not your Lord and Savior. If we do this, he will also deny us. However, if we are unfaithful to him—if we fall into sin, if we get distracted with the things of this world, if we fail to live up to all that he expects of us—he will still remain faithful. Let this truth sink into today: Even when we struggle to be faithful to God, he will still be faithful to us.

That is incredible, isn't it? If we deny him, he will deny us. But if we are unfaithful to him, he will still be faithful to us. That is so deeply comforting to me because I know that my nature—and your nature and the nature of every other person—is that we will be unfaithful to God. At some point. In some way. We will let him down. God cannot depend on us in every situation. But even though it is in our nature to be unfaithful, it is in his nature to be faithful. It is who he is. It is how he acts. He is full of *hesed*, of loyal love, of covenant faithfulness. Even when we are faithless, he still remains faithful. Praise God. For his steadfast love endures forever.

Endnotes

1. Elisabeth Kwak-Hefferan, "About Old Faithful, Yellowstone's Famous Geyser," Yellowstone National Park Visits, May 13, 2022, <https://www.yellowstonepark.com/things-to-do/geysers-hot-springs/about-old-faithful/>. Accessed 7/20/22.
2. Janet Ademy, "U.S. Marriage Rate Plunges to Lowest Level on Record," The Wall Street Journal, April 29, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-marriage-rate-plunges-to-lowest-level-on-record-11588132860>.