

Are You up for “CHALLENGE: FAITH!”?

A sermon based on 2 Timothy 3:14-17

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is a challenge unlike any other. The specialized equipment you need. The shape and level of health you have to be at. The experience you have to have accumulated. The months, probably even years of planning just for this one, probably once in a lifetime, event. And those are just the tangibles, to make sure you're prepared for any possible physical challenge you might meet along the way. But there's no guessing how much bravery and courage and even plain common sense is needed. You see, fail the challenge, and a strong possibility of death awaits.

I'm not so sure he was even close to being thoroughly prepared for that challenge, to climb Mt. Everest. A fellow pastor's brother, in decent shape, was in Nepal and decided he wanted to give it a try...or at the very least, make it to Everest's base camp. He didn't even make it there. He was woefully under-prepared, and whether it was not enough water, not enough warm clothing, or not properly adjusting to the thinner air (I don't remember which), his body temperature started dropping as he was rapidly losing heat and was beginning to go unconscious. Death could have been a reality had the guide not called for a helicopter rescue. Doesn't exactly excite you about doing a challenge like that yourself now, does it?

Well, friends, today, Christian Education Sunday, we have before us a challenge unlike any other. Not a lot of equipment needed. In regards to your health, your spiritual health, come as you are. Your experience, what you've experienced, believe me, it's more than enough. And there's really no planning required. But the goal is just as lofty, and failure is just as threatening.

Are you prepared for it? Are you up for “CHALLENGE: FAITH!”?

Now, what exactly is “CHALLENGE: FAITH”? We've been advertising it for the better part of the past month. There've been flyers up here at church, newsletter articles written about it.

Well, the first part of challenge is this: you growing by leaps and bounds in your faith in Jesus. And the second part is a challenge to get every one of you into one of our varied Bible classes/Bible reading opportunities, whether it's Sunday morning Sunday School, men's Bible study, women's Bible study, our in-home Bible Information/Review Class, Daily Bible Readings, or something like that. That is the challenge.

But before we take a closer look at these two parts of “CHALLENGE: FAITH,” let's talk about some other challenges you might be facing. Like, how's work going? Crazy busy, having to work lots of overtime, but cutting into family time? Too slow? Maybe like a lot of other places, cuts are looming? Maybe it's a job, pays the bills, but not exactly loving it? Or maybe, I like the job itself, but my co-workers are not my first choice for people I would want to work with?

Or, how's school going? Do you have a tough test or big project coming up already? Your so-called friends are acting like anything but? Parents getting on you about your grades or pressuring you to do better? Or, there's this girl/boy you like but are wondering how you can know how far is too far?

How's the family? Well, Great-Grandma is not doing so well; could be any day now? My wife just got laid off, so we're struggling on just one income? My brother is going through some stuff right now, always seems to be depressed? Kids don't ever seem to be listening, are only getting naughtier by the second? Wife and I are constantly arguing, can't ever seem to agree on anything.

Or, maybe just in general, how's life? Can't ever seem to catch up, at work, with chores at home? Dreading the gloomy and cold weather on the horizon? Getting flustered or frustrated with our government and our society?

We could go on. I would imagine it can't be that difficult to come up with at least a handful of challenges or struggles or hardships you are dealing with right now. We all have our own. Well, if I were to ask you what challenges you're facing on your trek heavenward, the answers would be the same, wouldn't they? Because the truth is, every trouble, every hardship we face here is something challenging us on our individual faith-walks, something trying to derail us on our journey to heaven.

So then, maybe the bigger question is: where are you going? When these challenges arise, where are you going? Where are you going for answers, for strength, for encouragement?

There are a lot of options, aren't there? Friends and family, often seem to be the best place to start, right, because they know you best and they love you and want to make things better. But is their advice always the best. Is it always right? Or, how about self-help books or similar literature? Again, full of wonderful advice on how you can become a better you, but is it just a patch to cover a deeper wound? And of course, there's google or Facebook. You can find almost anything you're searching for online or find people who dealing with the same frustrations you are and who will share in your grievances. But, again, is that the best approach, really the best approach?

The truth is, any of these options are adequate, at best. But none of them are always right. None of them are truly fulfilling. None of them can always give you what you, believer, always need.

You know that. But you also know there is one option that has it all. It's right here. Answers for your every question. Encouragement when nothing seems to be going right. Strength when you're feeling weak. And best of all, forgiveness when you screw up, forgiveness when you sin. Everything you need and more, for this journey, for life's challenges.

So, back to "CHALLENGE: FAITH!" Why the big deal? Why am I so determined to get you growing in your faith in Jesus and, especially, to be doing it through more study of God's Word?

It's not because of the challenge to get every member into some extra Bible study or Bible class, that somehow I need to accomplish this to boost my ego. It's because of the challenges out there, the challenges you are encountering each and every day, and how God, here in 2 Timothy, says the solution is to "continue in what have learned." In other words, keep going in God's Word because, far above everything else, that's what you need.

So then, what is it? What challenge in being more active in reading or studying God's Word are you facing? Is it a time issue? That life is so hectic, trying to fit in God's Word is just another thing you don't have time for? Is it the redundancy factor? That you know the main teachings of the Bible, you feel there's nothing else you can really glean from Bible class? Is it the understanding? That you've tried reading and comprehending God's Word before, but there were some things you just couldn't wrap

your mind around, so you've given up? Or is it laziness or stubbornness? You'd rather not hear what God's Word has to say because you may not like it, or you just don't want to put in the time to grow in your faith in Jesus.

You might notice in our verses Paul talks about the Word's uses: teaching, rebuking (that is, calling one to repentance), correcting, training in righteousness, equipping you for every good work, or for your life of sanctification.

What do you think? God's Word is useful? I would venture to say it's absolutely necessary. It's vital. You need it. You need it more than just once a week. That would be like saying, "I'm going to climb Denali, or maybe more reasonable, Angel Rocks, but I'd rather not take anything with me, so I'll drink a bunch of water at the bottom, and just hope it's enough to get me up to the top and back down." Now, for Angel Rocks, you might be able to get away with that. But I wouldn't ever suggest it. They say to always take more water than what you think you'll need.

There's always room for more of God's Word, more than what you think you need. Because the challenges don't stop, the sinning doesn't stop. We're not facing Angel Rocks. We are climbing up the Denali-sized mountain of life. The tumbling rocks of sin are around every bend. And for you and I, there's always more we can be doing. There's more we need to be doing with God's Word.

That's the challenge. And here's Jesus' solution: the cool, refreshing water of forgiveness. **"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us." "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool." "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more." "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."**

You see, Jesus doesn't leave alone in these challenges, he doesn't make us climb that mountain on our own.

No, from God's Word, we know Jesus was one who, as a human, was **"tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin."** From God's Word, we know, in spite of his perfection, for our sake, we, who are sinful, who don't always give God's Word the time and respect it deserves, for us **"the LORD laid on him the iniquity of us all...and by his wounds, we are healed."** From God's Word, we are assured Jesus **"was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification."**

There's no other place we can hear this good news. There is no other place where we are exposed so much to the grace of God, shown to us through Jesus and his life, death, and resurrection.

And redeemed, forgiven, there's no other place where you and I can be strengthened and encouraged and nourished in our faith in Jesus and equipped for life's mountainous challenges than here, in God's Word. And if you're the person who has to admit, "I haven't had enough of this water of life; I need more," I have good news for you.

Recently, I was talking with one of the pastors in our circuit, who was also trying to find ways to get his members into God's Word more. Their latest thing was every member getting a Bible which was laid out in a way that would enable the reader to get through their entire Bible in one year. And not only that, but he started a Facebook group where they could share insights from that day's reading or ask

questions on a passage they didn't quite understand. But, as you can guess, what started out strongly unfortunately started dwindling as people got further behind in their reading and were starting to give up.

Here's what the pastor did: every so often, he would declare a "Day of Jubilee." It was similar to the Old Testament's "Year of Jubilee," a special year in the nation of Israel when all debts were forgiven and everyone got to start over new.

If you haven't met your "CHALLENGE: FAITH!" this is your "Day of Jubilee." Your debt of sin is forgiven. You get to start over fresh. You get to meet this school year's challenge anew.

Continue in God's Word. Find it, not just to be useful, but to be a vital part of your faith life. Challenge yourself to enjoy its many blessings, not just Sundays, but even more regularly. You need it. You see, Paul says, "All Scripture is God-breathed," which means everything in these pages has been inspired by God, word for word. But also think of these God-breathed Scriptures as being God's breath for you, believer.

We know oxygen is necessary for life. Which makes it odd that there are such things as oxygen bars, where you have to pay to inhale different-flavored oxygen. But God's Word is not just a commodity you should look for when you're searching for something different. Just like the need for oxygen is vital to your life, the need for God's Word is equally, if not even more, important for your faith in Jesus. And it's free!

Breathe it in. Bible Study, Daily Bible Readings are just an extra 1-2 hours out of your week. That's it. Not much of a time commitment. But we know the benefits are truly out of this world.

And finally, this is how much I want you to meet this challenge...this is how vital I know this is for your faith life. If one of these Bible study options absolutely do not work with your schedule, I will make plans to come to your house and study God's Word with you...that's how strongly I feel about you needing to be in God's Word inside and outside of worship

And don't let it just be me. Brothers and sisters in Christ, hold each other accountable. We are all our brother's and sister's keepers. We have the responsibility...I would even say the privilege to be concerned about every other person's faith life and want to encourage them to grow as much as they possibly can.

I think the disciples put it best when they said to Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life." For life's challenges, God's Word is vital. Prepare for those challenges by challenging yourself, to breathe, drink in God's Word, to read, study, learn these words of everlasting life more. Challenge your faith this year, and your faith in Jesus (nourished by God's Word) will help you overcome every challenge. Guaranteed. Amen.