

A full-fat faith

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[0 : 0 0] I was in seminary in the early to mid-2000s, and I remember during that time when I was in school, we saw the peak of a movement that has come to be dubbed New Atheism.

I remember discussing this a lot with other students and with our professors. Names like Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris had become household names, and we were discussing this because it really seemed as though secularism had finally triumphed.

A lot of people were hailing it as the end of the church, as the end of religion, and that secularism had really won the day. Now, 20 years later, we're seeing something that many people would have said was impossible 20 years ago.

We are seeing a resurgence of faith, particularly among the younger generations. There was a recent study from last year that found that Gen Z are far more likely to be people of faith than their parents.

I think one statistic said that they are half as likely to be atheists compared to their parents. One of the least religious generations next to baby boomers is actually my generation, Gen X.

[1 : 1 5] But from my generation on, we see higher and higher and higher levels of faith. And in interviews with these people who have come to faith find the same thing across the board.

You have a growing number of people who are deeply disillusioned by the empty promises of secularism, by the trivialities, by the banality of secular humanistic life.

And these are people who are craving a sense of connection to something deeper, something bigger than themselves. Louise Perry is a writer and podcaster who converted from her days of, she says, troubled atheism to Christianity.

In her words, she now goes to a happy, clappy church every week with her family. And when asked why, she says simply, secularism has failed. Secularism has failed.

And here's what I find most interesting. These new converts to Christianity are not flocking to places where they are finding a watered down, dumbed down, seeker sensitive version of Christianity, which is something that was happening in also peaking around my generation, which I wonder if there's a connection there.

[2 : 3 2] I don't know. But the phrase being used now, I read one article where somebody said, what we're looking for is a full fat faith. And I love that expression.

If you will pardon me, I'm going to use it this morning. A full fat faith. That's what people are craving. And as it turns out, when it comes to Christianity, and when it comes to the reality of following Jesus, that's the only option there is.

That's the only option. So what does that mean? What is a full fat faith? We're going to look at 2 Timothy chapter 2 to help answer that question. So let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word.

We thank you that it has a power unto itself that comes from you. And so we're not here merely to consider and reflect on ideas. We're here to encounter the living God.

Through your written word, we're here to encounter your living word, Jesus Christ. To not only see him, not only hear him, but to receive him. Lord, and as we are preparing to receive his body and blood, so now would you give us the grace to receive his word.

[3 : 39] We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. So let me give you a little context. Just as I know that Jeff started our series in the lectionary looking at 2 Timothy last week, the apostle Paul is writing from prison in Rome.

He's writing to his protege, Timothy, who is a bishop over a network of churches, probably house churches in Ephesus. And he's essentially writing to encourage Timothy, who's facing a whole array of challenges in his ministry.

And in doing so, the apostle Paul gives us this compelling vision of the Christian life, or if you will permit it, a full-fat faith. And so we're going to look at this vision of the Christian life.

And why would we call it a full-fat faith? What does that entail? And the first thing we see when we look at this passage is this. We call it that because the Christian life, following Jesus, requires everything that we have.

It requires everything that we have. In verses 3 to 7, Paul uses three metaphors to describe the Christian life. He says it's like being a soldier. It's like being an athlete.

[4 : 48] It's like being a farmer. Now, what do all those things have in common? Well, they all involve people who are fully committed. Fully committed to something bigger than themselves.

They all involve people who are willing to endure significant hardship. They're willing to suffer. They're willing to sacrifice in order to serve that higher aim.

So in order to live the Christian life, Paul is saying we need the single-minded devotion of a soldier. We need to relentlessly resist anything and everything that distracts from that focus.

So success, comfort, politics. He's not saying these are inherently bad. But he's saying we can't allow them to entangle us.

The image is of a soldier's sword, the scabbard getting tangled up in the cloak so they can't walk because they're all tangled up. He says we can't allow things like that, comfort, success, politics, the local crisis du jour, to entangle us, to distract us from our primary aim of pleasing the one we follow.

[6 : 01] Likewise, he says we need the rigorous self-discipline of an athlete. This is not a passive faith. This is not a go to summer camp one summer and respond at the altar call and get saved and then nothing.

He says this is a faith, this is a life that requires daily focused spiritual habits. Athletes were legally required to complete a regimen of training and you had to take a vow that said you had completed that training before you were allowed to compete.

That's what he's talking about. So following Jesus requires daily focused spiritual habits and disciplines. Why? Because we are called to, with the help of the Holy Spirit, retrain our hearts to learn how to love God, to learn how to love other people.

That requires a lifetime of focused, disciplined, retraining. And then he says we need the long view perspective of the farmer, knowing that we're not working for instant gratification.

That we are setting aside a life that focuses on immediate gain and immediate gratification. We are, as Christians, playing the long game. We are willing to forego.

[7 : 21] We are willing to do without. We are willing to sacrifice now in the immediate for the sake of that which will last into eternity. We're investing in the kingdom.

That's what the farmer image is all about. In the, in, in, what is the kingdom? We're investing in the healing of the world. We're investing in justice. We're investing in mercy.

We're investing in the building of the church and the spread of the gospel. We need the long view perspective of the farmer. There is a lovely poem by Mary Oliver called A Summer Day.

And the last two lines of the poem say, tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? Now, these words have been commandeered by Instagram self-help gurus to talk about the need to live for ourselves and be true to ourselves.

But if you were to ask Jesus that question, what are we to do with our one wild and precious life? Here's what Jesus would say. He would say, well, whoever would save his life will lose it.

[8 : 30] But whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. And that's the choice, really, before us. That's the decision.

Door number one. Follow one of the various life scripts that the culture hands out. You can find them everywhere. They all boil down essentially to this.

Accumulate the things that you think will make you happy. Build a little life for yourself that is safe and comfortable. Where your needs are met reasonably. And then do what you can to extend your life as long as you possibly can.

But to what end, I would ask? Do you think so that maybe you can outlive your friends? So that you can outlive most of your family members?

So that you can find yourself one day sitting alone, wondering what it was all for? Or door number two.

[9 : 37] Starting today, aim your life at Jesus Christ and give it everything you've got. Now your life is going to be harder. It's going to be a lot harder.

You know, we're praying this morning for Grace Drexel's father, who's one of the most well-known pastors in China over the vast network of house churches there, who's been arrested.

And we have no idea what his fate will be. We are praying for his release. Number of people in his congregation have also been arrested. Other pastors have been arrested. This is a big deal.

That's a man who made this choice, who said, door number two, I'm going to aim my life at Jesus. I'm going to give it everything I've got.

Now your life will be harder. You may face things that you never imagined possible as a result of that choice. It may be shorter, your life may be. But you will know what it means to be fully alive in a way that nobody who chooses door number one can ever imagine.

[10 : 44] And the life you gain will be a life that lasts into eternity. So the first thing we learn about full fat faith is this. It requires everything that we have.

Everything. But here's the disclaimer. Following Jesus this way is not only hard, it is going to ask more of us than we have the strength to give.

That's a guarantee. It's going to push us beyond our limits. I just recently read a story about a 12-year-old girl named Lee Rodriguez Espada.

And she signed up to run a 5K. And she's running late the morning of the race. And so she gets there and she sees a group of people at the starting line. And so she rushes up and she jumps into the group with the people right as they say go.

And she takes off running. And she runs mile one. And she runs mile two. And she runs that. And around mile four, she starts, this is a long 5K. What's going on?

[11 : 45] And she starts asking around. And she realizes that she made a mistake and she jumped in with the wrong group. And they were actually running a half marathon. So her mom's freaking out.

Where is she? Where is she? Right? Well, she realizes this and she decides to keep running. And she not only finishes the race, but she actually gets a medal. And her mom's like, I have no idea how she did it.

I'm so proud of her. So she found herself running a half marathon. And I love this story because I think that there are a lot of times like that that happen in the Christian life. You know, when God allows us to face a situation where faithfulness and obedience mean taking something on that we never anticipated.

You know, times when we are betrayed by someone that we love and trust. Or times when you get a cancer diagnosis. Or times when you lose your job.

Or having to face unwanted singleness or unwanted fertility. Infertility. Or unwanted fertility. And these things happen and we say, hey, this isn't the race I signed up for.

[12 : 56] You know, when I came forward and responded to that altar call in middle school, I wasn't signing up for this. You know, I never agreed to this. I'm not prepared for this. And we say, doesn't it say somewhere in the Bible, doesn't it say that God will never ask us to do anything that goes beyond what we can do?

Actually, it doesn't say that anywhere in the Bible. Actually, it says the opposite. More is gonna be asked of you than you have to give. And so it confronts us with this question of where do we find strength to keep running the race?

Right? How do we continue when we figure out we're not in the 5K, we're in the marathon? How do we keep going? And the truth is, if we rely on our own strength, we're not going to be able to finish the race.

Full fat faith not only requires everything that we have, but it is fueled by grace. It's fueled by grace. Paul says to Timothy, you then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

Now, at first, when you read this, be strengthened, it sounds like Paul is telling Timothy to strengthen himself. You need to get stronger, Timothy. You need to buck up. You need to cowboy up. You need to get ready to do some seriously hard work for the Lord.

[14 : 09] That's not what he's saying. He's saying to Timothy and to us, Timothy, you need to learn how to grow stronger by the strength that comes from outside yourself.

The strength that comes from the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And this, friends, is one of the great mysteries and wonders of the Christian faith. The relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

God not only calls us to faithful obedience, he also supplies everything that we need for faithful obedience. Now, that is a mystery.

But you see it all over Scripture. 2 Peter 1, Christ, through his divine power, has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness.

God gives you everything that you need for godliness. Philippians 2, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. Okay? For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

[15 : 23] Is it up to me or is it up to God? Yes. This is extremely important for us to reflect on. God is not just concerned with our obedience.

God is not sitting there with the checklist. He did this, she didn't do that, she did this. God is glorified by our dependence on him.

He is glorified when we depend on him. He is glorified not only when we follow and obey, but when we depend on him for that obedience. See, some of us go wrong by trying to live lives of obedience without dependence.

I got saved, it's like God was angry at me, but then God let me off the hook and he was willing to kind of give me a do-over, but now it's up to me, I've got to get my life together, and you live your life with this constant sense that God is disappointed or angry or frustrated.

You know there's things you should be doing, but you're not doing them, and so your Christian life kind of feels like this sense of vague guilt and shame that you always carry around. That's obedience without dependence.

[16 : 27] That's all up to me. And I know other people who, you know, we go wrong in the opposite direction. We live lives that are lives of dependence, but with no obedience. You know, the kind of let go and let God approach.

You know, we kind of treat grace like a get-out-of-jail-free card, and it's like, well, God forgives everything anyway. What does it really matter? And we kind of do what we want. You know, God will get over it. He'll forgive me. See, both of those are not only unbiblical, they fail to glorify God, and they collapse something that is a profound mystery, which is this, that on the one hand, we are called to use every resource at our disposal to pour everything we have into following and obeying Jesus.

Give it everything you've got. On the other hand, we are called to depend entirely on his grace as we do it. You know, St. Augustine captures this beautifully in his prayer, Lord, command what you will, but give what you command.

I love that. Command what you will. Whatever you want me to do, ask, and I'll do it, but give me the ability to do it. So, Paul wants us to be assured that we can always trust God to give us what we need to obey God.

So, he gives us this beautiful poem. You know, now this is probably an early hymn. You know, you can imagine the worship music like we just had, beautiful worship music. What were they singing in the first century church?

[18 : 01] It's probably, this is one of the hymns. If we had died with him, we will also live with him. If we endure, we will also reign with him.

If we deny him, he also will deny us. If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself. Maybe that's the chorus, for he cannot deny himself.

For those who are willing to take the risk of following Jesus, this hymn says, God promises you new life. If you're willing to take the risk, if you're willing to give it everything you've got, God promises new life.

He promises victory, and he promises that you will one day be vindicated. For those who reject Jesus, God honors that decision, and he will respond in the same way.

But here's, listen to where it goes. Here's the crux, right, the core. No matter how unfaithful we might be, God will always be faithful to us.

[19 : 06] No amount of our unfaithfulness will ever eclipse God's faithfulness, and our faith and our salvation and our sanctification ultimately hinge not on the promises that we make to God, but on the promise that God makes to us.

He will always give us what we need. So you say, well, how do I actually do that? How do I get grace? How do I get strength? This is so esoteric. This feels so abstract. What does this actually mean on a daily basis?

Let me give you a few answers to that question. Number one, it means pray. It means pray.

You know, prayer is one of the things that we can do anytime, all the time, wherever we are. We can pray. Particularly, is there someone in your life that you feel called to love, but you find them very difficult to love?

You don't have to say who it is now, but is there somebody in your life? Are there people that you struggle to love and you just don't feel it?

[20 : 13] Commit to praying for that person. Don't do anything else. Just commit to praying for that person every day and see what happens. Pray that God would strengthen you with the grace that is in Christ Jesus to love that person.

And so often, what you will find in your heart over time is a softening and an opening of your heart toward that person. Another way we access the grace, the strengthening grace of Christ is through his word.

I don't know about you, but often for me, just spending five minutes, ten minutes, reflecting on Scripture in the morning, even if it's not a particularly profound passage, even if I don't have a particularly profound experience of doing it, I emerge from just that five or ten minutes feeling more aligned with the heart of Christ.

You know, I think that is the grace flowing in, right? A third thing I would say is through the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist. You know, what we do at this table is not just a ritual.

We're not just here remembering, reflecting, celebrating something that happened. We believe and teach in this church that this is a means of grace. In other words, this is a way that God promises to mediate his grace in the lives of his people.

[21 : 31] We believe that Christ is really and truly present in this meal. We believe that God strengthens and nourishes us spiritually when we receive this in faith. One of the reasons I'm excited to have our own building in a few months is so that we can begin to offer midweek opportunities for prayer and for Bible teaching and for the Eucharist.

this is why I believe friends, church should be among your highest priorities. I see people bend over backwards, rearrange everything to make it to a travel sports game.

This should be the highest priority. This should be the highest priority. I guess what I'm saying is I don't believe that we can live the Christian life faithfully because I don't think that we have the strength to do it on our own and in order to get that strength I think that we need to gather together to pray and to open God's word and to receive the sacraments and I don't think that there's another way to do it.

I think this is the way that God has given us. We need to be strengthened to live lives of faithfulness. God has called us to a life that requires more strength than we have in ourselves and this is what we do every week.

We pray, we open God's word, we share in the sacraments. And if you can think of the Christian life as this rhythm of inhaling and exhaling, right? We breathe in, we come together as a church, we are strengthened and then there's an exhaling, we go out into the world on mission.

[23 : 05] And then we breathe in and we're strengthened by grace and then we go out into the world on mission. And that's the, that's the respiratory system of the church, right? In and out, in and out, contemplation and action, contemplation and action, right?

Drawing strength, pouring out, right? Being filled, pouring out. So a full faith requires everything that we have and it's fueled by grace.

But what's it all for? Last point. According to 2 Timothy 2, it's all meant to be shared.

This faith, this gospel, this good news, this kingdom, this work that the Holy Spirit is doing in the world, this good news of restoration and renewal and justice and mercy and peace and eternity, it's all meant to be shared.

Paul's overarching concern, I would say, in the pastorals and certainly in this part of the pastorals is that the gospel would continue to reach the lost.

[24 : 07] I love this. He says, essentially, I may be bound with chains as a criminal, but the word of God is not bound. You know, I would love to think that Grace Drexel's dad is reading and thinking about and praying those words right now.

I may be bound with chains, but the word of God is not bound. Therefore, I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.

The word of God is not bound. God's work is ongoing in the world. So we need a much bigger vision of conversion, I think. You know, we tend to think of evangelism as something that happens out there.

You know, Christians in here, non-Christians out there, and evangelism is a kind of this subset of the church that some people do. Some people who are good at it go out.

You know, people like Lisa go out and they evangelize because they're good at that kind of thing, right? Sorry to put you on the spot, but she's really gifted at it. And, but the rest of us, you know, and maybe we learn some apologetics and some good arguments, but, you know, we need a much bigger imagination for the fact that God is always at work converting and bringing people to himself all the time around us day and night.

[25 : 28] The word of God is not bound, right? Conversion is happening all the time. And conversion is not only happening out there among the pagans, it's also happening in here all the time.

Right? The Benedictines talk about daily conversion of life. You know, you become a Christian, you get baptized. That's a one-time thing, yes, that's true.

But then, as the Benedictines say, every day of our lives we seek to be changed by grace and to be turned more toward the heart of Jesus. So we, those of us who may have thought of ourselves as Christians for many, many, many years, we are in need of continual conversion, right?

And thank God the word of God is not bound because it makes that possible. There are also, by the way, children and youth in our midst. Our primary evangelistic responsibility is to them.

It's to them. It's often said in the church that the church is one generation away from extension. I don't know if that's entirely true, but don't miss the point there.

[26 : 37] it is up to every generation to pass on the faith to the next generation. That is one of our primary responsibilities. I think if we really believed that, we would be turning people away who want to work with our youth ministry.

We would be turning people away who want to work with our kids. That's our, one of our top responsibilities. They need to be reached with the gospel. And, and frankly, with all due respect, there are people who come to church who assume they are Christians who are not.

They're not converted. Grew up going to church. It's kind of what you do. It's what your family did. But you're not converted. You've never really wrestled with your sin. You've never really repented.

You've never really experienced the grace of Jesus Christ. And you need to be reached with the gospel. So the point I'm trying to make is the work of evangelism isn't something that we do out there or that certain people do.

It is the work of the church. We're all responsible for it. And it starts right here in this room with us. And this is why Paul tells Timothy in verse 2, what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to faithful men, or that could be translated men and women, anthropoi, faithful people is what the NIV says, entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others also.

[28 : 03] So think about how many generations, Jeff loves to ask this question when we meet with our youth ministry leaders. He'll read this passage and he'll say, how many generations are there, right?

How many, think about it, right? Christ passes this on to Paul. Paul passes it on to Timothy. Timothy passes it on to others who are faithful and competent to teach, who then are meant to pass it on to yet more people, right?

So you see generation after generation after generation after generation passing on this body of teaching, right? So here's the principle. If you want to live a full-fat faith, if you want to be a healthy, growing follower of Jesus, that involves both receiving and reproducing.

In other words, you should have people pouring into you and you should have people into whom you are pouring, right? You should always have people you're learning from and you should also have people you are investing in.

Now that doesn't mean that everybody's called to be a pastor, doesn't mean that everybody's called to be a teacher, a preacher, that's a subset of people in the church and it's an important part. The principle though that applies to everybody is that we should always have people that we are looking to and learning from and we should always have people that we are pouring into and investing in.

[29 : 19] And that's true for every Christian. We need both. So I want to encourage you to reflect on your own life. Who's investing in you? If you can't think of anybody, I want you to spend some time on it because there may very well be people who are that you're not, you don't think of in that category because you're not sitting down every week at a coffee shop talking about how your week went.

But that's not really what we're talking about here. Who has taken an active and vested interest in your spiritual life? Who out there is praying for you?

Who cares about how your relationship with God is going? Right? If you can't think of anybody, make that one of your top priorities. This is why, friends, we have core groups.

So I would say if you're not in one, join a core group. Immediately you have people who are there partly because they want to know and invest in your spiritual well-being. That's the whole point of a core group.

Our expectation and hope is that even though I know it's logistical, you know, challenging and all of that, is that everybody who's a member or regular or attendee of our church would be part of a core group. If there's not a core group near you or that's accessible, talk to us and let's talk about starting one next semester.

[30 : 34] You could also prayerfully seek out one or two other mature believers in the church and just say, hey, could we get together from time to time for a season? Let's try it. You know, let's get together until December.

Let's get together until May. And maybe we could read the Bible. Maybe we could read another Christian book together. Maybe we could just spend time in prayer or do daily prayer together. Maybe we could do the Ignatian exam.

And there are things that you can do together to simply have people who know you have an active interest in your spiritual life. And then I would ask the flip side of this, who are you investing in?

If there's no one, I would say make that one of your top priorities. And the first thing you can do is just start praying. Start praying and asking God to put somebody on your heart. Just say, God, I want to invest in somebody and I don't even know what that looks like, but please help this happen.

Please bring somebody to mind, right? And let me just demystify this whole thing. You do not need special training or expertise to do this kind of thing. You don't need to be ready to answer somebody's questions.

[31 : 39] You don't need to be full of life wisdom to tell them how to navigate all of life's turns and twists. Frankly, if you're doing that kind of thing, you're kind of missing the point. People think that that's what they want, but that's really not what we need.

You know, here's what you need to be able to do. Just take an active interest in that person's spiritual growth. Just care about it. Just care about it.

Listen well, which means do more question asking and listening than answering. You know, be judicious with your answers.

One of the best things you can do is just the phrase, tell me more. Tell me more. Tell me more. Pray for that person. Hey, I'm gonna pray for you every morning when I wake up.

You're on my list. I'm gonna pray for you every morning. That's all you need. We can't cause growth in another person. The Bible's pretty clear about that. Only God can do that.

[32 : 38] What we can do is create the conditions where growth is more likely to happen. We can plant, we can water, right? We can create the time and the space where we're getting together.

But God's gonna do what God's gonna do. And God's gonna do what only God can do. So friends, as we kind of step back and look at this passage as a whole, there is an invitation here.

There's an invitation to a full-fat faith, right? There's an invitation to aiming our lives toward Jesus and giving it all we've got. There's an invitation to learning how to depend on the strength that comes from the grace that God provides.

And there's an invitation to reorder your priorities so that you are being invested in and so that you are pouring into the lives of others.

And if you want this kind of faith, then you are in the right place, right? This is what we are committed to here at Advent. And I believe it's only going to become more true, more realizable, more possible in the coming years as we move to our new home.

[33 : 49] Let's pray. Lord, we thank you and we praise you. May these words prepare us to receive you. there is no one here, I believe, who does not feel the need for strength.

We need to be strengthened. We pray, Lord, that as we pray, as we sing, as we open your word, and as we receive your body and blood, Lord, we pray for that strength to come that we might glorify you not only with our obedience and faithfulness, but because we are entirely dependent on you.

And it's in your son's holy name that we pray. Amen.