

# Youth and Faith

by Valsan Thampu

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of true faith in empowering young people to face and overcome the pressures of life, and to live a holy and upright life.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 1:26, Psalm 111:10, Matthew 8:23, Luke 10:25, John 14:6, 1 Corinthians 13:5, Hebrews 11:1

**Topics:** "Faith Development", "Youth Ministry"

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## Description

Valsan Thampu preaches about the importance of faith, particularly for the youth, emphasizing the need to understand faith as an adventure and a celebration of life rather than just seeking favors from God. He discusses the three models of faith: little faith, blind faith, and true faith, highlighting the importance of true faith in Jesus Christ for attaining fullness of life. Using Joseph as a case study, he illustrates how faith enables individuals to overcome challenges, be faithful, holy, and upright, and have spiritual understanding and discernment in navigating life's temptations and pitfalls.

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## Transcript

Joseph: A Role Model for the Youth

We need to reckon three preliminary issues while addressing the relevance of faith to youth.

The first is that of the increasing marginalisation of the biblical faith from the mainstream of contemporary life. Most people see Christian life as a matter of adhering to routines and regulations, which are unrelated to the art of living. To them, spirituality has little to do with the challenges and possibilities of one's predicament. The scope of faith is reduced to seeking favours from God who, in theory, is professed to be non-partisan. Life, in the main, is lived according the pressures and pulls of human nature and secular culture.

Such a view of life has tragic consequences for the youth. Youth, increasingly, is assumed to be a period of freedom and adventure, when life is to be lived big, bold and beautiful. Religion seems exactly the opposite. The truth, however, is quite the contrary. Faith is an adventure and a celebration of life. Or faith, understood and practiced spiritually, enables us to attain fullness of life.

The proof of the vitality of a spiritual tradition is the extent to which it empowers the most vulnerable section of a society or community. It is this insight that underlies Jesus' announcement that he came to "preach the good news to the poor". Metaphorically, vulnerability is the essence of poverty. Today,

contrary to popular assumptions, the youth are especially vulnerable and poor. The more privileged they are, the more vulnerable they tend to be; for they live in emotional, relational and spiritual deprivation. The worst part of this poverty is lack of awareness concerning it and the neglect it suffers. Several factors contribute to this: unprecedented affluence, ever-expanding boundaries of individual freedom, the collapse of moral norms under cultural pressures, perilous neglect of the logic of life, depletion of the sources for guidance and counseling, emergence of a culture of consumerism and indulgence, and so on. Besides all these, there is something about the spirit of this age that is hostile to youth. HIV/AIDS, to take but one example, seems to be a pandemic programmed to waylay and wound the youth. The escalating rat race in consumerist-materialism robs this generation of the leisure to be. Young people are too busy earning their ever-swelling livelihoods and the multiplication of its tools and toys, to enjoy the gift of life. Spiritually, this age is infected with the virus of alienation that seems to have plunged our sons and daughters into a sort of 'acquired happiness deficiency syndrome'.

There is an urgent need to address this reality. Yet, ministering to the youth continues to be a grossly neglected priority in our community today. It should not surprise us if our young people become sceptical of the relevance of faith to their needs. They, not unlike us, are uncertain even as to what this word "faith" really means. This all-important word does, of course, evoke stereotypical and mechanical answers from most of us; but little more than that. This has always been a problem: a key problem at that; so much so that the author of the Hebrews deemed it necessary to offer a handy definition of it (Heb. 11: 1)

Broadly speaking, there are three models of faith

Little faith. In the context of calming the tumultuous sea (Mtt. 8: 23-26), Jesus puts the spotlight on the "littleness" of the disciples' faith. "Little faith," as is evident from the context, is faith that crumbles in the face of a crisis. Why does such faith prove so brittle? Is it not because it is faith in 'little things'? As compared to God, the boat -even the wind and the sea- are little things; for God is the Creator and creation as a whole is subject to the authority of the Creator. Faith that can sail smoothly only on placid waters in the sea of life is little faith. In that event, our faith is not in Jesus but in the seaworthiness of the boat to which we entrust our safety. God is not the ground of our existence, but the sea is. In an apparent sense, the boat of our life sails on the sea of creation. But the whole of creation must, and does, subsist on the faithfulness of the Creator. "Little faith" is faith that is blind to this truth. It is such faith that makes us worry as to "what we shall eat, what we shall drink, and what we shall wear." It is essentially faith in the relevance only of material resources. God is seen and valued only as the supplier of these provisions.

Blind faith. The exemplars of this kind of faith are the "priest and the Levite" in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10: 25-37). They did not have eyes to see the needs of the wounded man on the roadside. That is what blind faith does. It makes us blind to the needs of others. It also makes us blind to our own larger potentialities. Blind faith was the problem with the servant who got only one talent in the parable (Mtt. 25: 14-30). When we are blind in this respect, we develop a 'persecution complex' and feel that all others, including God, are hostile to us. Blind faith gets us too exclusively obsessed with what we are that we become blind to what we can be. This is the foremost stumbling block to personal transformation. Nicodemus too is, in this sense, an example of blind faith, from Jesus' perspective. Hence the exhortation, "you must be born again" (Jn. 3:3).

True faith. The difference between the Priest and the Samaritan in the parable is not their material resources but their faith. While the priest was handicapped by his blind faith, the Samaritan was empowered by his true faith. True faith is faith in Jesus Christ who is the truth (Jn.14: 6). That truth

includes the insight that life belongs to God and that it needs to be a priority in the practice of faith. Seen in that light, attending to the bleeding wounds of the roadside victim was more important than making profit or surging ahead in career. Jesus is 'the way' to faith of that order. The goal of this faith is to lead all people to fullness of life. This faith has the power to move mountains; but the mountains that need to move are all inside of us. We do not need faith to move the mountains out there; we have technology to do it. Only faith can move the mountains within: the mountains of self-centredness, negativity, cynicism, alienation and emotional paralysis.

Because we are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-27), we cannot but have faith. We can choose, though, from among these models of faith. We can choose between true faith on the one hand, and a hotchpotch of little faith and blind faith, on the other. The alternative to true faith -and young people may do well to note this- is not 'agnosticism' (a state of no faith) but 'little faith' and 'blind faith'. They are the two facets of our spiritual penury. Faith of this kind breeds only spiritual foolishness. This makes, in the words of the Psalmist, the fool say 'in his heart, there is no God' (Ps. 14:1). The spiritual fool is not a brash or blatant atheist. He does not say, "there is no God," with his tongue. He only says as much in his heart, as the Rich Fool did in the parable (Lk. 12:19). His assumption that "there is no God" is writ large over the lifestyle he adopts, on the strength of his material prosperity, "eat, drink and be merry".

The basic purpose of true faith, as is evident from the inspiring example of this handsome and winsome young man called Joseph, is to help us to cope with the challenges, opportunities and pitfalls of life, and not to insulate us from them. That means, among other things, that the power of faith must be measured, in terms of the extent to which it transforms us and enables us to be steadfast. The problem is with us, and not with the world. Or, we are the reason why the world abounds in problems. That also means -and this is the good news- that we need not succumb to them. We can overcome the seductions and pitfalls of the world through faith. In that sense, we are 'more than victors' through Christ.

Joseph: a case study in youth and faith

The challenging story of this young man (Gen. 39) offers an insightful illustration of the dynamics of faith, poignantly relevant to the predicament of the youth today. They too, like their Old Testament counterpart, live in the midst of a spiritually alien culture and way of life. They are, besides, exposed to its insidious temptations and enlarged opportunities for licentious and self-destructive options. They are living in a world that offers more convincing alibis for playing truant with faith, than for staying steadfast in the 'narrow way' of life.

Jesus said, "You shall know a tree by its fruits". Say, faith is a spiritual tree. What are, or should be, its fruits?

Faith enabled Joseph to face and overcome the pressures of his life- situation.

The business of faith is not to change the world in our favour, but to empower us to overcome the world (Jn. 17:15). For all his godliness, Joseph was spared no trouble! We may even say that he might have got into less trouble if he were not his father's favourite and if God's favour were not upon him! Cast into a dry well by his brothers, sold out into slavery, helpless and bewildered amidst the pomp of an alien and powerful household, Joseph had an extraordinarily difficult context for the ordeal of his faith. The story of Joseph serves to highlight a cardinal truth in the understanding of our spiritual vocation. What matters is not where we are, but who we are. And who we are depends on whether we have faith or not. Faith implies a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. 'Where we are' becomes all-important

when we are alienated from God. Hence the spiritual irony in God's question to Adam, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9). It is a question situated in alienation, meant to awaken Adam to the reality of his spiritual degradation. To the extent that Adam is alienated from God, he would develop an irresistible psychological need to cling to the bush as his refuge. The idea of emerging from the bush would seem too risky and traumatic. If God is not with us, or we are not with God, we better make sure that we stay in the thickest bush possible. But for his faith in God, Joseph would not have risked incurring the wrath of Potiphar's wife and of being cast out of her household. In that event, he would have sought refuge in the bush of her personal favours and enjoyed its illicit fruits. That would have, however, excluded him from the larger plans and purposes of God.

Faith enables us to be faithful. Joseph's example teaches us that faith that does not express itself as faithfulness is no faith at all. Faithfulness is the incarnation of faith. Or, through faithfulness 'faith' as Word becomes the flesh of lived life and yields the fruit of the Spirit (Jn.1: 14; Gal. 5: 22-23). Faithfulness, which translates the theory of faith into its practice, is the secret of life in all its fullness. In the case of Joseph, God blessed Potiphar through him, which was rightly understood by Potiphar as the result of God's favour upon Joseph. We prove our faithfulness, principally, in two ways. First, by carrying out the duties entrusted to us with devotion and distinction and, second, by facing and overcoming the temptations that emerge from the given context. In every instance of temptation, our faith and our faithfulness are tested. Temptations try by fire the vulnerability of our faith. Joseph walks through this red-hot spiritual furnace and comes out like gold refined in fire (Rev. 3: 18).

Yet we must not entertain naïve expectations about being faithful in a world that is faithless. Sure enough, Potiphar 'trusted' Joseph with everything he had. But that does not prove that Potiphar was a man of faith. He was a sensible man who knew what was good for himself. He had faith in a man-made scheme of things and, for a while, in the integrity of Joseph. His faith was not in God. He, unlike Joseph, was incapable of true and enduring faith. Joseph was faithful to him, but he was not faithful to Joseph. His faith proved too brittle to withstand the pressure of lies: the malicious eruption of a woman's vindictiveness. The way Potiphar turns against Joseph is a sober warning that we cannot put our trust even in the best of our benefactors (Ps. 118:8). Our faith must be, primarily, in God. This does not mean that we have to see every person through eyes of suspicion, or invent treachery where it does not exist. It does mean, though, that we must not build the mansion of our life on the sand of human faithfulness. This is a sober lesson that young people overlook at grave peril to themselves. Far too many of them repose their absolute faith in unworthy quarters and end up devastated and degraded. That tips some of them over the edge of despair into suicide.

Faith enables young people to be holy and upright. Holiness, spiritually understood, is the byproduct of an unwavering personal relationship with God who is holy. From the wisdom of such a relationship, it becomes clear that every instance of sin is an offence against God (v.9). This spiritual insight becomes the wall of fire around a young person, as it did in the case of Joseph, and preserves him in the path of righteousness. Academic notions of morality and propriety collapse in the heat of temptations; whereas a deep and lively relationship with Jesus endures and empowers. Joseph sees succumbing to the advances of Potiphar's wife as a sin against God. This abolishes all ethical dilemmas and clears away self-entrapping cobwebs of carnal rationalizations. Joseph's conduct, in the course of temptation, is decisive and unambiguous. He is not impaled on the horns of a dilemma for the reason that he is not split between his spiritual and physical selves. His faith enables him to be an integrated and wholesome person, free from the debilitating dialectics of divided loyalties.

Finally, faith fortifies us with spiritual understanding and discernment. Joseph's understanding of love is a case in point. He has the discernment to see through the fallacy of the lady's amorous advances and recognize this to be anything but love. Ours is an age, as several cultural anthropologists have warned us, that mistakes lust for love: an age that is open only to a physical or bio-chemical interpretation for love. Embracing this unthinkingly amounts to an abdication of the responsibility implied in the discipline of faith. Faith enables us to understand love aright. Arguably, this is a domain of perilous misunderstanding at the present time. From Joseph's response to the wife of

Potiphar, we may derive the following insights into what love is not:

What love is not: a checklist

What does not honour God, or is contrary to the will of God, cannot be love. Love, according to St. Paul, is incompatible with self-seeking. "Love does not seek its own" (1 Cor. 13:5). Joseph's clarity of understanding and decisiveness in responding arise from his eagerness to do the will of God. This is the logic of authentic love. God is love. Whatever alienates us from God cannot be love.

What does injustice to others cannot be love. Justice is of the essence of love. God's concern for love and His keenness that justice be done to the whole of creation is basic to His nature, of which love is the defining element. Joseph could not have indulged the lady's inclinations without injuring his master. He knew only too well that love could not be the emotional 'fig leaf' that covers injustice in inter-personal relationships. The telltale difference between love and lust is that the latter has a penchant for injustice. Addiction to lust implies emotional under-development. Lust is to Mammon what love is to God. Material affluence could aggravate the propensity for lust, unless we are spiritually vigilant. Love, on the other hand, is a sign of spiritual and emotional maturity. It is, also, a catalyst for continuing growth, growth even unto the stature of Jesus Christ.

What is ruled by shifting passions and preferences cannot be love. Love never fails (1 Cor.13:8). The fact that Potiphar's wife felt, or longed intensely, for Joseph did not mislead him into believing that she loved him. Joseph knew that illicit involvements were like flowers cut from the stem and kept in a vase. They will wither over time; often sooner than expected. Love, to be steadfast, must be rooted in God. Such love never fails. It is a folly to absolutize worldly passions. Only the Absolute deserves to be loved absolutely. God alone is the Absolute. Only that which is rooted in the Absolute can take on the attributes of the Absolute. The Absolute does not change, but remains the same, yesterday, today and forever. For that reason, it is logically sensible to expect that love rooted in God will endure. It can be counted on. Also, only that which endures is love. It is an insult to the idea of love to attach that label to shifting passions and inclinations.

The mindset that uses others as instruments for self-indulgence is incompatible with love. Of course, Potiphar's wife imagined herself to be madly in love with Joseph. But he knew better! He had the spiritual discernment to see through her desperate confusions. In real terms, she valued Joseph only as a tool for alleviating her personal frustrations. She did not value Joseph as a human being. Spiritually, the function of love is to help us see and respect human worth. So, any relationship that is not respectfully committed to the worth of the partner concerned falls short of the basic requirement of love. If our love is genuine, we will never degrade the persons we love into instruments. The way Potiphar's wife turns against Joseph, to save her own skin, gives the lie to her self-delusion that she is in love with Joseph. It proves, indeed, that she is a stranger to the very idea of love. It may well be the case that she is the victim of a loveless social

and domestic culture, as the members of all power-driven systems tend to be. We might venture a guess and consider the possibility that Joseph was aware of this side of the lady's predicament. Even so, how was he to respond to her in a spiritually wholesome fashion? By surreptitiously accommodating her personal needs, empathizing with her as the victim of a way of life? Or, by rejecting the way of life -its strategies and remedies- to which a famine of the human is endemic? Spiritual solutions are radical rather than cosmetic.

What is anarchic and disruptive cannot be love. The logic is simple. Love, says St. Paul, "builds up" (1 Cor.8: 1). Love can only have an up-building impact. It can never lend itself to anything anarchic. The passions of Potiphar's wife were perforce anarchic and disruptive. It would have, sooner or later, plunged her household into pain and grief. It could have harmed her and torn her family apart.

What accommodates falsehood cannot be love. Potiphar's wife was untrue not only to her husband, but also to Joseph. No one can be selectively truthful. Falsehood is a cowardly strategy driven by the interests of the self. Depending on what is needed in the given situation to protect the interests of the self, the person concerned will resort to strategies of untruth, unmindful of its collateral victims. The intention is not to hurt others; it is only to save oneself. In the ironic logic of life, we can escape from responsibilities and consequences only by scapegoating others. Falsehood is the stone that we give to people, when they ask for bread or the scorpion we serve to them when they ask for an egg. It is farmed in hearts of stone. Potiphar's wife has no qualms at all in turning her genius for falsehood against Joseph, when the situation seems to require it. The very spontaneity of it is truly scary! Can anyone gather, asks Jesus, figs from thorns and thistles?

What limits us to a way of life too narrow to accommodate God's purposes for others and us cannot be love. Had Joseph succumbed to the lady's seductions, he would have lived in a private hell of pettiness and spiritual emptiness. He would have transplanted himself from God's wide, wide world to the narrow confines of a selfish individual's world of manipulation and deceptions. He would have exiled himself from a world of freedom and cast himself into an invisible prison, in comparison to which the King's prison was a blessing in disguise. In that prison he could, at least, be his true self, publicly and freely. Soon enough, the jailer learns that Joseph is absolutely trustworthy and once again the despised, discredited young man finds himself elevated to a position of trust and responsibility. It does not matter to Joseph that now he is in charge only of his fellow prisoners, and that he has lost the privileges of being the trusted steward of a rich man's household.

The story of Joseph is, thus, a nuanced illustration of the discernment that true faith imparts to young people. "The fear of the Lord," writes the Psalmist, "is the beginning of wisdom" (Ps.111: 10). Lacking this wisdom, young people are liable to compromises that corrode their lives and corrupt their personality.

Conclusion:

The scope of faith needs to be understood more in relation to our mandate to lead a godly life before death, than with reference to life after death. This is not because life after death is unimportant. It is all-important. But it is, in itself, quite outside of our control. There is nothing we can do about it, except in terms of how we live the life that is given to us. Faith is relevant, almost exclusively, to this part of our life. This world is the sphere of our faithfulness. Eternal life is the domain of God's faithfulness. If we are faithful in this world, we can count on God's faithfulness in respect of our eternity. In the world to come, when we shall see Jesus face to face, as St. Paul assures us, we may not have to live in faith. Then we

shall know.

Faith is the antidote to alienation. The greater the alienation, the deeper and stronger our faith needs to be. In this secular and agnostic age, which is especially vulnerable to the allurements of alienation, the relevance of faith can only increase. Insofar as youth is the period in life most vulnerable to the infection of alienation, it is all the more imperative that we nurture the youth of today in the dynamics and discipline of faith. At the same time, more than in any other phase of life, youth is potentially closer to fullness of life, to which faith alone holds the key.

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