He Shall Be the Stability of Your Times

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The Question Beneath the Question

The question came up: Is faith a condition of the heart and the mind? What can we do as believers to help encourage the faith of those who have little, or none? Today is as good a day as any to talk about faith. There is, in fact, nothing more fundamental than this question, because human existence is uncertain, and that uncertainty leads us, inevitably, to want to find stability.

Economic instability makes us reach for financial certainty. Political instability makes us look for leaders who seem more solid. Cultural and religious instability sends us toward whatever appears to anchor us. As human beings, we have a deep desire (somewhere inside us, somewhere in the brain, I can't tell you exactly where) to anchor ourselves in something that feels certain. Because fundamentally, we are afraid to die. We are afraid that the decisions we make will lead to our early termination. And there is a slippery slope in that desire for certainty. It can lead us to cling, in faith, to things that will not actually materialize. I am not talking here about soteriology or our salvation in God. I am talking about how we live our life.

Trust and Faithfulness

Faith is the central question, but the Hebrew Scriptures do not talk much about faith as a noun. They talk about trust and faithfulness. To trust in God meant that you anchored your actions in a God who was able to deliver on the promises he made. Israel, regularly, broke faith with God. Their hearts would turn away. They would give themselves over to other confidences.

When one nation came against them, they would reach out to another for some certainty: "Babylon is coming against us; let's call Egypt," forgetting that a few generations before, Egypt was the problem. They would wait until the very last moment, until the night before the hordes came over their walls, before they would cry out to God, that rock of stability.

We can think of faith as mental assent, and mental assent is not excluded, something has to enter the mind. Paul says, "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). You hear the Scripture, you hear the good news that God sent his Son into this world to set all things right, and faith rises up in your mind. But Paul goes on, in that same chapter, to quote Isaiah: "They have not all obeyed the gospel" (Romans 10:16). Obedience, faithfulness to what we hear, is critical. As long as we believe that faith in God is inseparable from faithfulness to what we hear, then it is inseparable from faithful action.

And each of us is listening to something. The challenge is that the surrounding voices are so strong (cultural, religious, political, economic, particularly here in the West) that we will begin to anchor ourselves, because of this natural need to survive, into one of those things. We will try to find stability in unstable times by gripping any one of them. And therein lies the challenge. As any assembly of faith that tries to navigate current events knows, simple answers will never achieve what God is actually calling us to.

Jesus Always Takes It up a Level

Notice that in every binary, straw-man question put to Jesus, he never answers black-and-white or straw. Religious certainty would have us come up with a clean answer for every scenario. But God does not deal that way. God deals in higher-level pillars of faith. If you think your pillars of faith are tactical, very specific things (how do I respond to this binary statement,

what is the precise verse for this particular cultural moment?) Jesus did not even go there with the people who pressed him. He took it up a level. And we have got to take it up a level.

All the rituals we perform in faith, all our customs, all our actions, have to be rooted and grounded in ultimate truth. In John's gospel, grace and truth are the two words that come most prominently, and those are high-level concepts, hard to make granular. When you start to talk about the things that founded the world, the God of creation who founded the world, what are the pillars of foundation? Those are the things we need to anchor ourselves in.

And when we anchor ourselves in those, we will become stable in unstable times. We will not be destabilized by words or economic downturns or political upheavals. We will not be upset by those things, because we have anchored ourselves in the creative pillars of all creation: love, mercy, truth, humility. These are basic, and they are all rooted in God's character. The commands we receive from God, the words of Jesus Christ, are all rooted in the character of God.

We don't have to guess. The questions being asked today were not the questions being asked 75 or 100 years ago. The questions of a century ago were not the ones being asked 500 years before that. In another 500 or 1,000 years, our children's children will be answering different questions still. But the pillars of foundation, the foundational response, will come from the exact same place in the future that they come from today: a life rooted in what the Hebrew Scriptures call trust and what the New Testament calls faith, producing trustworthiness and faithfulness.

Cart Before Horse: A Verse I Built My Life On

I want to take you to Isaiah 33, verses 5 and 6. I have built my life on this passage in the King James cadence, only to find, when I read it more carefully, that the King James version puts

the emphasis in the wrong place. I was reading it the other day in the ESV, and at first I thought, “I don’t like the way that says that.” But the more I read it, the more I realized: no; I had it cart before horse.

Here is the New King James of Isaiah 33:5–6:

> The Lord is exalted, for He dwells on high; He has filled Zion with justice and righteousness. Wisdom and knowledge will be the stability of your times, and the strength of salvation; the fear of the Lord is His treasure. (Isaiah 33:5–6, NKJV)

And here is what the ESV and most other modern translations render:

“And he will be the stability of your times, abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge; the fear of the Lord is Zion’s treasure” (Isaiah 33:6, ESV).

Do you see what happened there? If we are not careful, we can develop a bias toward another stabilizing thing in this world called wisdom and knowledge. You know what I have spent my whole life doing? Gaining more wisdom, more knowledge. If I could just read one more book. If I could just look at one more Scripture before we walk out of the house. There is always one more nail to hammer, one more thing to bend down on the other side, and then, then, I will feel stable.

But if you are not careful about where the roots of that wisdom and knowledge are, you are in trouble. If your wisdom and knowledge is rooted in your religious heritage, your political heritage, your economic heritage, your cultural heritage, if that is where it comes from, then everything you read in the Scriptures will be read through that lens, and you can never, ever change who you are, because your confirmation biases will hold you in place.

The ESV gets it right. It is not wisdom and knowledge that is your stability. He is your stability. If we hold to the Head, Jesus Christ, if Christ is in God and we are in Christ, that is the

ultimate stability. And flowing from that relationship and that relationship alone is wisdom: an abundance of wisdom, our wealth and our riches, our confidence in the face of adversaries, our composure in the face of cultural voices that want to tear down.

They mocked Jesus on the cross, saying, “If you are the Messiah, come down off the cross.” We will not be the last generation to have mocking, cruel language used against us. The real question is: are we going to be the last generation of Christians to not use mocking and cruel language toward those we think are our enemies? That is the question. Are we going to trust God and have a faith anchored only in him, so that the words coming out of our mouths come from a place of stability, not from the biases of the things we have made our pillars?

Don’t Run Backward for Stability

In troublous times, watch what happens: everyone runs back. If we could just get back to where we were in 1950. Back to the turn of the century. Back to the Reformation. Back to when the Catholic Church was strong and stable. There is a reason the Catholic Church is growing across parts of the world: it shows itself to be stable, and people reach back for anchorage in stability. That will be a very good thing for millions of people. But I am not going to stabilize myself in a personality or a movement. I am not going to anchor myself in that.

The stability we hope to gain is anchored in trust in one Almighty God, who looked across humanity and came up with a plan to send his Son into the world to die. Which is paradoxical. Why not crush? Why not mow down your enemies? Why not come in like a lion? Why die like a lamb? Because that is actually how this world gets turned around. When the Lamb begins to speak, out of his mouth comes a sword (Revelation 1:16), and it is through that sword that all of us were slain. We were dead in trespasses and in sins, but we have been made alive in Jesus Christ.

Assyria at the Gates

Isaiah 33 was written when the Assyrians had surrounded Jerusalem. They had already destroyed the northern ten tribes and scattered them. Now you have Mount Zion and one little band of survivors. I remember being in a Western Civilization class at a secular university, opening the textbook to the page on the Assyrian Empire, and seeing a diagram with the empire stretching for hundreds of miles in every direction, and one little dot in the middle. The dot was Jerusalem. Assyria never took Jerusalem.

With all that power around them, Isaiah 33 sat in the moment when it looked like an inevitability that the powers of this world would dominate Mount Zion. But Hezekiah decided at the last minute not to send any more gold or silver to the Assyrians. They had breached their agreement and were going to come anyway. And in a single night, the Assyrian army crumbled, and Israel was saved. Hezekiah was right to trust the Lord.

Do Not Put Your Trust in Princes

Our trust in God is anchored in his character, in the permanence of who God is. We sang the song from Revelation: “Him who was, and is, and is to come.” That phrase derives from God’s declaration to Moses at the burning bush. Moses asked, “Whom shall I say is sending me?” And God said, “I AM.” He is. Present tense. He is when we need him. When we are in slavery, when our situation seems impossible, he is. The confidence God gave Moses was that Moses could go in and speak to Pharaoh, and that somehow, in those words, the deliverance of the children of Israel from Egypt would come. Because God was present. They had no power, no armies, no economic position to make this victory occur. But it occurred.

Psalm 146:

> While I live will I praise the Lord: I will sing praises unto my God while I have any being. Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish. Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord his God. (Psalm 146:2–5)

Past theologians, past political movements, past economic policies, none of that will get it done. This nation will not exist in three or four hundred years, if not sooner. The maps will be redrawn as they have been redrawn for thousands of years. Princes are not permanent. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He says to Israel through Malachi, “I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed” (Malachi 3:6). He is permanent. He has not destroyed us. He is not going to destroy us.

If we put our confidence in anything else (wisdom, knowledge, princes) we can expect those things to depart and to perish. But happy is the one who has the God of Jacob for help. Do you trust God to help you? Faith is not mental assent. Trust is not mental assent. It is confidence in God when all hell is breaking loose.

Why There Is Help in God

Hope in the Lord; he is the one who made heaven and earth. Why do we hope in God? Why is there help in God? Because he is the Creator. He did not do this for fun and games. We are his creation. He wants us saved. He wants us healthy. Everything we can hope in is anchored in the work he began when he created us.

Look into the eyes of your little girl, your little boy. Look into their eyes and see the love. When I held my daughter for the first time as a new dad (21 years and 360 days old, five days before my 22nd birthday) something in me said, every bit of my energy and effort will go toward

making this girl's life the most amazing life that can be lived. And the same thing came over me with every one of my children. I was going to give everything. If that is me, a flawed and limited father, Jesus says it himself: "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?" (Matthew 7:11).

So why do we continue to give our faith and allegiance to things that will perish, and princes that will perish, and prophets that will perish? We need to turn our allegiance to God, and fully give it. Otherwise there is no faith. There is no trust. It is just words. As Matthew 7 will show us in a minute, the "Lord, Lord, have we not . . .?" people will receive the answer, "Depart from me, ye workers of iniquity; I never knew you" (Matthew 7:23). Words alone, "Lord, Lord," won't get it done.

By Matthew 25, Jesus has separated those on his right from those on his left:

"When saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? . . . Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:37, 40).

Trust in God is translated into action for others. Our faith is demonstrated in action rooted in the character of God.

The Character of God Is the Treasure

Look at what the character of God is. The verses that follow Psalm 146:5 are all about his character:

> Which made heaven, and earth, the sea, and all that therein is: which keepeth truth for ever: which executeth judgment for the oppressed: which giveth food to the hungry. The Lord looseth the prisoners: the Lord openeth the eyes of the blind: the Lord raiseth them

that are bowed down: the Lord loveth the righteous: the Lord preserveth the strangers; he relieveth the fatherless and widow. (Psalm 146:6–9)

He keeps truth forever. He is true to his word, forever. He executes justice. And the kind of justice God executes is not retributive justice: tit for tat, quid pro quo. That is not the justice of God.

In Isaiah 42 (and again in 43), he sends his Servant into the world to bring forth righteousness and justice, and the Servant does it like this: “A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench” (Isaiah 42:3). He fans the flame of the one about to go out. He binds up the one who is broken. That is the justice we are talking about. We are so rooted in a Western model of justice that says the scales must always level out: you do this, you get that. But we serve a God of restorative justice. A God who can weigh in the balance all of human suffering for a thousand generations, all of the hurts of your great-grandparents that led you to be the broken, busted-up human being you are, who continues to break and hurt others. He is the only one who knows how Humpty Dumpty was broken, and he is the only one who can put him together again. That is restorative justice, because he loves him. He holds humanity in his hands.

Like he does in Ezekiel 16, where he finds a little girl cast away in a field by her mother, the umbilical cord still attached, and he says, “Live!”: breathe, little girl, breathe. Do you feel him saying that to you? Over recent weeks the Lord has been speaking to us, and what he is saying is: breathe. Get life. Be who I have called you and created you to be.

Then our actions, always, are rooted in his character. He is truth. He is justice through restoration. He gives food to the hungry. He gives freedom to the prisoner. He opens the eyes of the blind. Now, if you are physically blind today, I will not be able to do that. But if the blindness is mental, open up the ears of your heart and hear the words I am saying to you. I

believe what is rooted in this will give you enlightenment. Words are how we bring light to blinded eyes, not that God does not also physically heal. He raises those that are bowed down. He loves the righteous. He watches over strangers.

Do you want to be like God? Do you want to know what he commands? Watch over strangers. Lift up those that are bowed down. Share what you understand with others and enlighten their eyes. Relieve the fatherless and the widow in their distress.

If you say, “I don’t have enough, the storehouses, the retirement, I’ll be able to retire at 91, but I just don’t have enough to give to them,” then your confidence is in money and possessions. But verse 10 says, “The Lord shall reign forever.” So put your faith in him.

The Rock at the End of the Sermon on the Mount

Turn to Matthew 7, the closing of the Sermon on the Mount. People want me to give them a command for every scenario. What answers do you want me to give you so you can rehearse for the straw-man arguments coming your way? I can’t give them to you, I am not clairvoyant. I don’t know what they will be. But I can anchor you in the character of God. I can point you to a God whose character loves the fatherless and the widow, who feeds the hungry, who visits those in prison, who shares what he has, who opens blinded eyes. When you encounter the next situation, you draw on those great pillars.

> Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. (Matthew 7:24–25)

You want stability? Hear the words of God. Hear the words of Jesus. Build your life on those. That is the rock. The rain will come. The Assyrians will gather. The straw-man arguments,

the binary black-and-white arguments, the economies, the cultures; it will all collapse. Uncertainty is the only certainty. The rain will come, the floods will come, the winds will beat on the house. But your house will not fall, because it is founded on the rock. That is faith in Christ. That is faith in God. That is confidence.

We used to sing a song in this assembly: "I will trust him when the dark shadows gather. / I will trust him when the sun doesn't shine. / I will trust him when the storms are raging. / I'll trust him till the end of time."

Our actions will always betray what we truly believe. If we believe the world is full of scarcity, we begin to hoard and curl in on ourselves. If we believe the world is full of abundance because God has declared it to be so, and he has opened up his treasures, then the fear of the Lord, as Isaiah 33:6 closes, is the key to his treasure house. Do you want to unlock the treasures of heaven? Reverence him. Honor him. Give him first priority above all the other priorities we give: political, economic, social, cultural, religious. That reverence of God will be the key that unlocks the treasure house of heaven.

> But every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it. (Matthew 7:26–27)

The Pillars Earlier in the Sermon

Watch how Jesus does this throughout the Sermon on the Mount. He keeps taking commands up a level. He says, "You have heard that it was said . . . Thou shalt not kill." And then: "But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment" (Matthew 5:21–22). He says: when you bring your gift to the altar and

you remember your brother has aught against you, leave the gift, go and be reconciled. Reconciliation is the higher order. You can fulfill the binary command, don't murder, and miss the actual point entirely. Jesus says: deal with the anger. Be a reconciler. Let that be a pillar of this assembly. I need to give you no other commandment than to be a reconciler. Love your brother.

Then he gives another:

> Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven. (Matthew 5:43–45)

What is the family resemblance? I cannot look at my sons or my daughters and not see Julie and me lived out in them. They have got our character, for better or worse. We are to live this way so that we will be sons of our Father. You want the character of your Father? Bless those that curse you. Do good to those that hate you. Pray for those that despitefully use you and persecute you. You need no other commandment than that. Love your brother, love your enemies.

And then later in the same Sermon: do not worry about your life, what you shall eat, what you shall drink, how you shall be clothed. Notice how the worry runs straight into our theme. The Gentiles seek after all those things. That is what the ungodly seek after, because their world is full of scarcity and uncertainty. But we serve a God of abundance. The conclusion: "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33). Faith is seeking first the kingdom of God.

Lord, help us. Help us to live the commands of God. My concern is that when the questions are down here in the binary, “is it this or is it that,” that’s weak sauce. The straw-man argument is weak sauce. What God has called us up to are guiding principles. I cannot give you a command for every scenario of your life, but I can tell you what the pillars of God’s character are. And based on those pillars, every ritual, every song we sing, every interaction we have with one another, and every interaction we have with our enemies will be seasoned with that character. Every response comes rooted from that place.

Godliness With Contentment Is Great Gain

Let me close with 1 Timothy 6, beginning at verse 3:

> If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself. (1 Timothy 6:3–5)

Paul is not even talking about the ungodly here. He is talking about religious leaders: people claiming Jesus, but doting about questions and strifes of words. Doctrine, Paul says, accords to godliness: God-likeness, the character of God. That is where wisdom and knowledge are found. That is where all stability is found, in the words of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content” (1 Timothy 6:6–8).

You want the treasury of God? You want to unlock the keys of heaven? The treasury ends up being character. That is the riches of God. The treasure house of God is the character he has poured out from himself into our lives. It is not money. It is not stability in this world. The winds will come, the seas will rise, the winds will blow on everybody's home. That is not what we are going to avoid. What we are going to gain is the great gain of godliness.

> But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. (1 Timothy 6:9–10)

If you grew up in a home that was broken, you may gravitate to family and exalt it and create an idol of it. If you grew up in a home that was solid and well-formed but had no money, you may gravitate to want to anchor and strengthen your life in money, that will bring me what I need. Whatever the malady of the human spirit, the deprivation will sometimes lead to an unnatural appetite for that very thing as you try to fill the void. Ask me how I know. Pursuit, pursuit. Never enough. Never enough. When do we say, "I am done"? When do we put our confidence in God? When are we content with food and clothing?

> But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses. (1 Timothy 6:11–12)

There they are: righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. These are the pillars. These are the pillars of our belief. All commands fall from these.

Notice: it starts with a confession of faith, but hold fast to that. Faith becomes faithfulness. Trust becomes trustworthiness. Paul charges Timothy “in the sight of God, who quickeneth all things” (rooted again in creation), “and before Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate witnessed a good confession”: Christ was speaking words into Pilate, that we might keep this commandment without spot, blameless, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ. The commandment is that we be content, that we trust God, that we hold on to the faith with which we started.

> Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life. (1 Timothy 6:17–19)

The storehouse of heaven is opened through our reverence of him. Be rich in good works. Ready to give. Willing to share. Storing up for ourselves a good foundation, built on the rock. Is your stability in God? When we give, when we share, when we allow the characteristics of God to manifest in our lives, that is a good foundation for the time to come, that we may lay hold on eternal life.

Confession That Becomes a Life

Faith starts with a confession. But it continues in an every-day getting up and believing and trusting God, and not anchoring ourselves in any other wisdom or any other knowledge, but only that wisdom and knowledge which proceeds from God. Hold to the Head. He is the stability of your times.