



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Old Faithful

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ MAY 15, 2022

The “Old Faithful” geyser, found near the center of Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, has been an object of fascination since it was first discovered in 1870. It typically shoots between 4,000 and 8,000 gallons of super-heated water from deep in the earth, high into the sky more than 100 feet, and does it approximately every 90 minutes. It is far more regular and predictable than any of the other geysers dotted around the park, though it’s not exactly clockwork-precise in its timing. Eruptions have occurred as close together as 45 minutes and as far apart as 125 minutes, but most of the time it’s about 1½ hours between them. During the summer thousands of visitors per day surround its perimeter to watch.

Nature is certainly not always so predictable and reliable. Weather patterns (snowstorms and hurricanes and tornadoes) are notoriously tricky to predict very far in advance. We still have not found a way to accurately anticipate earthquakes. But some parts of our solar system do follow a solid and dependable pattern: the earth’s revolution around the sun takes exactly 365 ¼ days every year, and it reliably produces the four seasons; the moon’s orbit is likewise predictable, allowing us to know in advance the tides. What a difference it makes when the rhythms of life are understood and we can count on them. Maybe that’s why so many pilgrims will make their way to “Old Faithful” this summer.

In human interactions, we likewise have a desperate need and hunger for faithfulness. The proud motto of the U.S. Marine Corps is

“Semper Fi” (or “Semper Fidelis”), the Latin phrase for “Always Faithful”; they have pledged their honor to be reliably there for our country to defend our freedoms. We all know how much we depend upon the faithfulness of our spouse, and our friends, and our parents when we are young. We place our resources in the hands of financial planners and accountants and lawyers who are obligated by their professional standards to act as “fiduciaries” for us (“fiduciary” comes from the same word used in the Marine motto—“faithfulness”); and they know that if they fail to act faithfully in the best interests of their clients they may face professional and legal consequences.

In our study of God’s Word today we will not concentrate on a single passage, as we usually do. Rather, I’m going to take you on a brief tour through Scripture, focusing on a single topic: the **Faithfulness of God**. The Bible consistently reveals Him as being faithful—in fact, He is the very definition or prototype of faithfulness. But for us, His faithfulness is not just an abstract quality. It is something we yearn to experience and rely upon in the midst of the nitty-gritty of our daily lives.

Therefore, we are going to examine the topic of God’s faithfulness in four categories, using four different texts of Scripture. Here is a simple outline of the path before us, so that it will be easy for you to follow.

1. **God is faithful when all else is changing.**
2. **God is faithful when we are tested and tempted.**
3. **God is faithful when we have failed.**
4. **God is faithful until the end of time.**

1. **God is faithful when all else is changing.**

Our text is the Old Testament book of Lamentations. It was written by the prophet Jeremiah (who also wrote a much longer book under his own name, giving the history of his times). Lamentations, as the name implies, is a poem expressing grief and lament over some painful things that had happened to him and his nation. The walls of his beloved city of Jerusalem lay in ruins, as their enemy the Babylonians had defeated them in battle and had torn down their defenses

to make them vulnerable. The king and many of the leaders of the government had been taken away in captivity. The economy was collapsing. Hard times were ahead for them. It was an experience of dramatic change.

And nobody likes change, especially when it's forced on them. Change often brings loss. When someone you love dies, when you lose a job, when you develop a serious disease, when the things you counted on for your security are shaken, it's normal to cry out in grief and lament. But Jeremiah knew something deep at the core of his being. Even though he didn't like what he was going through, and even though he could see the near future clearly, He was confident of one thing. Here it is, in Lamentations 3:19-23.

I remember my affliction and my wandering,
the bitterness and the gall.

I well remember them,
and my soul is downcast within me.

Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:

Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,
for His compassions never fail.

They are new every morning;
great is Your **faithfulness**."

If Jeremiah, in the midst of swirling and unpredictable changes, could stand firmly on the bedrock conviction of God's faithfulness, so can you and I. Even when everything else around us might be in flux and turmoil, He never changes. His love never fails us. We are always precious to Him.

2. God is faithful when we are tested and tempted.

A clear expression of this principle is found in Paul's letter known as First Corinthians. The Christians in that church were feeling pretty self-confident, even cocky. They were sure that whatever trials, tests, and temptations to sin might come their way would not be a prob-

lem to them. Paul gives them a splash of cold water in the face to warn them, but then he follows with a wonderful and reassuring promise:

So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall. No temptation [or test] has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is **faithful**; He will not let you be tempted [tested] beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted [tested], He will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

1 Corinthians 10:12-13

Life is filled with tests, temptations, and trials. Every day you or I will face some challenge. It may come as a thought or a seductive desire. It may be a difficult person or situation we must cope with. It may be pain or disability or loneliness. Don't ever think you're beyond temptation and testing. If you fall into that complacency or cockiness, you are most in danger. But although we can't control what comes to us, we can control how we respond.

Perhaps you've heard it said that "God will never give you more than you can handle." In a sense that is what First Corinthians is saying to us. And this is not to minimize the severity of the challenges we face. It is rather to remind us that when Christians face trials, we are not alone. God's strength to resist that enticing temptation one more time, to endure the pain one more day, to keep going through the anxiety or loneliness one more step, is always there for us. He will provide a way out, or the strength to endure. How do we know? Because, as Paul says, "**God is faithful.**" In our times of testing and trial we need to turn towards Him, not away from Him.

3. God is faithful when we have failed.

Of course we flunk some of our tests and succumb to some of our temptations. Anybody who claims to be above sin is only delusional. And so we have to deal all the time with our screw-ups and failures

and blunders—not just their consequences in wounded relationships and in personal weaknesses, but also the very real guilt we experience. Our next biblical text is found in the first letter of the Apostle John. With great insight into human nature, and equal insight into the heart of God, he presents the truth to us in these words:

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is **faithful** and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1:8-9

It's a blow to our pride whenever we stumble. But we will. Even people who have been Christians for decades and decades are constantly prone to sin. And denial of that reality will only lead us into more trouble.

When you and I sin, (not **if** but **when**), the solution to our guilt is not to deny it, justify it, explain it away or come up with rationalizations. The wise course is to acknowledge or confess our sin and take it to God for His forgiveness and “purifying.” He alone has the divine cleanser that washes clean our conscience and restores us to full, unbroken fellowship with Him. And His cleanser is the super-industrial-strength variety. No matter how dark and dirty and shameful our sins and secrets might be, they are never too great for His forgiveness.

God's forgiveness of you and me does not even depend on our forgiveness of ourselves. The fact is that some of us hold onto our guilt and beat ourselves up inwardly over what we've done. And we do so needlessly. The Lord does not forgive us because we deserve to be forgiven (because none of us ever do); nor does God say that He will forgive only the minor and insignificant peccadilloes and mistakes. Every sin is covered by the blood of Christ. Those who ask for His mercy receive it simply because He is faithful and has promised to do so.

4. God is faithful to the end of time.

If the theme of God's faithfulness has not stood out to us yet, like a bright lighthouse beacon piercing a dark night at sea, when we come to the last book of the Bible we find it proclaimed unmistakably. This book, known as Revelation (or The Revelation to John), has been a confusing and puzzling one for many students of it through the centuries. Some of its symbolism is murky, and its timetable is indecipherable. But there are some truths that come through clearly.

At the very end of the book, after portraying a continuing conflict between evil and good being waged through human history, we find that the Ultimate Hero appears on the stage. This hero, once the innocent Lamb slaughtered to pay for the sins of mankind, now returns as the mighty Conqueror. And at the end of time He will be revealed to all. Here is how Revelation chapter 19 describes Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord:

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse whose rider is called **Faithful and True** ... On His robe and on His thigh He has this name written:

KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

Revelation 19:11, 16

Those final words are, of course, the familiar text of Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus." When all the kings and dictators and presidents and emperors have seen their glory and power crumble, only Christ shall remain triumphant as the ultimate King and Lord. Revelation gives us a glimpse of the end of human history. We've read the conclusion to the book: Jesus Christ wins!

But it is very possible that your personal history and mine will end long before that final day. When we breathe our final breath and stand before the Lord, that will instantly become our last day. We will see Christ revealed in all His glory. We will bow before Him in

reverence and honor, and in gratitude for His grace and mercy shown to us. And it will be proven to us that He is faithful—not just for this life, but for all eternity.

Our Response to a Faithful God: Trust

The most appropriate response to One who has demonstrated themselves to be absolutely faithful is to trust them. I want to close by sharing an illustration of trust that comes from the experience of some of my personal heroes: people of great faith we refer to as missionaries. Though sometimes criticized by the woke crowd today for being agents of “cultural imperialism,” the reality is that all around the world through the centuries, tremendous good has been done by Christian men and women who have been unselfish and sacrificial and motivated by love. Many of the amazing stories of missionary labors have been untold—and perhaps known only to God.

One story of the power of mission work was told several years ago in a church journal. A mission team had been established in a remote African village, where they had set up a school, a church, and a medical clinic. The community and its inhabitants gradually saw their lives changed, and they came to trust the mission team greatly.

One day a man from their village, while on a hunting expedition, fell from a tree and suffered a serious multiple fracture of his foot and ankle. He was carried back to the mission station, where the doctor did some immediate first aid but could tell that intricate surgery would be required. The team got on their short-wave radio and called for a Mission Aviation Fellowship airplane to come, land at the small dirt airstrip nearby, and take him to the hospital in the capital city more than 100 miles away for orthopedic surgery.

The injured man was frightened. He had seen the big silver birds land and take off and fly away over the mountains, but he had never ridden in one. He was terrified at the thought. And yet the missionaries assured him that he would be fine, and that he could trust the big bird and its pilot.

The man and his family had a quick huddle to talk it over. While none of them had ever flown in an airplane, they had great personal trust in the missionaries—who had proven themselves to be faithful and reliable. The mission doctor had healed many of them of their malaria and other diseases with his mysterious medicines. And so they decided that, although they couldn't understand how or why the medical plane worked, nor could they imagine the destination of the hospital far away, nor could they comprehend what a surgeon would do to fix the man's leg, they would place their trust in the words and promises of the missionaries.

The patient's family placed him carefully in the plane, it took off into the unknown, and two weeks later he was restored to them: limping with a cane and a walking cast on his leg but well on his way to full recovery. Faith in someone's trustworthiness can get us beyond our fears and doubts, even when we don't know what's ahead.

My simple appeal to you today, based on the evidence of the Bible, is to trust God in whatever circumstance you find yourself. Why? Because God has proven Himself to be faithful. This is how one Christian pastor and author sums it up:

God is faithful to His Word, His promises, and His people. His character and nature could not be otherwise. You can depend on Him 100 percent of the time. He will never let you down. He may not do exactly what you want Him to do, or when you want Him to do it. You may not understand all His ways. **But He will never let you down.**

— Chip Ingram

