

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

You have in the certain nobleman today a beautiful example of faith. He exhibits the nature and character of faith, namely, that it is supposed to increase and, as Dr. Luther put it, become perfect. He shows that faith is not a quiet and idle thing, but a living and restless thing; it rises and falls, ebbs and flows, lives and moves. If this does not occur, then faith does not exist; it is, then, only a lifeless notion of the heart concerning God. "For true, living faith, which the Holy Spirit pours into the heart, cannot be inactive," as even St. James wrote. (cf. James 2:17) Therefore, do not think that if you have attained faith, that you now have everything; you must constantly grow and increase and continue to learn to know God better.

"Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour." (1 Peter 5:8) Here is a primary reason why: the devil is not idle. You are under constant barrage from the enemy, and this is not always something you can see or feel or otherwise even comprehend; sure, there are times when you will, such as when temptations come alluring. However, this is no mere persecution from a world hostile to the Gospel, but from the powers of darkness, as you heard today in the Epistle. (cf. Ephesians 6:12) The devil howls and rages; he is mad and foolish, and he cannot bear that a Christian grows in his faith; therefore, he is always, *always* at work against it.

Therefore, it is dangerous and deadly—and this to your everlasting life—to live heedlessly, for in those times, the devil is likely to take you by surprise. You can look to the people in the Bible as your examples of this happening, even the great ones among the saints.

- Moses, whom you often see rightly as someone with an exceedingly strong faith, had his moments of weakness and idleness of faith. As Luther put it, "When he was to strike water out of the rock with his rod, he doubted...The good man, Moses, who had performed so many miracles, is tripped by reason and falls into carnal thoughts, fearing that the unbelief of the people would hinder the great miracle and sign." (cf. Numbers 20:7-12)
- Peter also, was strong and confident in faith. He saw Jesus walking on the water, and by faith asked Jesus to bid him walk out onto the water. He was confident that the water could hold him, and he put a foot out over the deep. "But when he thought he was most secure, the wind and storm arose and he forgot the Word and lost faith; he fell, sank into the water and permitted Satan to tear faith out of his heart." (cf. Matthew 14:25-32)

Many people were strongly inclined toward Christ, despite what you think of the scribes and Pharisees, the Sadducees, teachers of the Law, chief priests, and elders. They regarded Him as a prophet and followed Him eagerly. That was, until He was seized, bound, and led away to be slaughtered. Then, no one stood by Him, instead crying out, "Crucify Him!" Even his own disciples forsook Him.

And still, the devil does not rest. He stirs up many sects and factions, but then, "[T]here must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you." (1 Corinthians 11:19) So, the devil has one deny that Jesus Christ is God or born of a virgin, while one attacks the Sacrament of the Altar, another the Sacrament of Baptism, and so on and so forth. The devil is always at work to exterminate pure doctrine.

Most frightfully, escape from the enemy is most difficult. He lurks and watches everywhere; he pushes his agenda so hard that even the elect stumble, as did Moses, Peter, and the Apostles. And the church today and you—you think you are safe, so you permit matters to drift along so that no one is concerned for his own welfare. Prayer should be made to God to maintain the Gospel and cause His holy name to be proclaimed more and more widely. Do you realize that you mouth the words that say this in the Lord's Prayer? But I doubt many of you truly know what it is you speak when you say those

words. No one actually prays for the advancement of the Gospel, as the Father and Jesus bid you to do! "So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth," Jesus says. (Revelation 3:16)

You should always be in the state as if you had only begun to believe today—always be so disposed toward the Gospel as if you had never heard it before. Such baptizing with water indicates this, that the Old Man daily drown and die with all sins and evil desires, and a new man daily rises to live before God in righteousness and purity forever. This is because the nature of faith is constantly to grow and become stronger, and this because the devil has no rest. He is always at work against you, finding any way possible to get in and wrest faith away from you.

Against his attacks you are a poor, weak creature. St. Paul wrote, "[W]e have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us." (2 Corinthians 4:7) The treasure is the Gospel and faith, but you are an easily broken clay pot. The devil knows this, so he rages and storms, seeking to shatter you and spill the great treasure.

And God places you, weak vessel that you are, among enemies. Think of how vexing this must be to the devil. You can hear it in the words of Goliath as little David approach him to combat him: "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" (1 Samuel 17:43) But it is especially vexing for the devil because God had planned to trample Satan under the foot of flesh and blood. If it were a mighty spirit or angel who would opposed the devil, he likely wouldn't be so sore; but along comes Jesus, "a worm and no man" (cf. Psalm 22:6a), who crushed the devil's head from the cross. Now, you, by faith, though but a weak earthen vessel, have the power to do the same by the grace of God; you do this not at all by your own strength, but alone by the power of God.

In light of all of this, you hear today that there was a certain nobleman whose son was sick in Capernaum. This is nothing new; parents the world over have sick children, some more sick than others, even to the point of death. It's tragic, but some of these children die, as is their lot in this fallen world. However, take note of the faith of the nobleman, who, "When he heard that Jesus had come out of Judea into Galilee, he went to Him and implored Him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death."

So little is known of this nobleman, but what is known is that he had faith here. He had heard of Jesus, how He had miraculously healed the sick. If anyone could help his son, Jesus could; what's more, he expected that Jesus would! You might even say that he expected every benefit from Jesus. This is the true heart of faith of a Christian! It attaches itself to Jesus, cleaves to Him, expects nothing but good and benefits from Him over and above what the world, the devil, and the sinful flesh experiences. And whether Jesus gives it or not, that faith is there because it knows—you know—that no matter what may come, you are secure in salvation by His grace alone!

However, for this nobleman, it is but the beginning of faith. The Word is having its way with him, but he is still new and infantile in faith. So Jesus says, "Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will by no means believe." It's the same rebuke He gave to Peter on the waves. And like with Peter, the rebuke was given in order to enliven faith, causing it to grow. In this test of faith, the devil would speak to him, "Return to your home, await the result; he will not help you." But how did the nobleman respond? He further pressed Jesus, just like the Canaanite woman, who sought but crumbs from the master's table (cf. Matthew 15:26-27): "Sir, come down before my child dies!"

"Faith was ready to droop and sink; but the Lord did not forsake him, raised him up, and said to him: 'Go your way; your son lives.'" What faith he must have had to take Jesus at His word here, for he does exactly what Jesus told him to do and went home. But he still lacked something. He must have thought that Jesus was incapable of effecting the cure unless He were present with the boy. Nevertheless, home he went without Jesus as his traveling companion. Jesus did this, as Luther taught,

to bring the man's faith to a higher stage, to get him to realize that He could effect anything by a simple word. So, He said to him, "Go your way; your son lives."

The father accepted the word of Christ and said in his heart: My son is ill; but I shall find him well. This was faith over against reason and experience. Reason would have led him to say, "When I left my son, he was ill. As you left him, so you shall find him." But faith says the contrary, stands firmly on the Word and drowns itself in it, and does not at all doubt that it shall be as the Word declares: "Go your way; your son lives." (Luther)

This was all confirmed for him as he is met by a servant on the way home who told him of his son's condition. He became well the moment Jesus said that his son lives. "[H]e himself believed, and his whole household."

Jesus deals the same with with you, permitting you to be tried and tested, in order to strengthen your faith. Therefore, when you close your eyes for the last time, and you have a bit of faith, it will be well with you, just as Jesus said, "I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you." (Matthew 17:20) The mustard seed is, perhaps, the smallest of seeds, yet even with faith of that "size," you shall be saved. This is because the size of faith doesn't matter, but that it is given by God and not destroyed by the birds—that is, the devil cannot tear it out of your hearts. However, you can let it be overthrown—you can give it up.

So, Peter, so long as he remained faithful, could have ventured many miles on the water according to the Word of Christ; he would not have sunk. But, the moment he wavered, he began to sink. So also Moses, whose faith was strong, but fell from it. Strong faith or weak, it doesn't matter, simply that one perseveres in it: "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life." (Revelation 2:10b) So, while Peter and Moses wavered, God did raise them up again, multiple times, to be sure. They now wear the Christ-won, God-given crown of life.

Faith consists in that you may not be secure and presumptuous, but remain in godly fear. By God's grace, you are rich in the Word of God and have been brought out of deep and great darkness. "The people who walked in darkness Have seen a great light; Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, Upon them a light has shined." (Isaiah 9:2) However, you forget the Word, you become weak, and you continue unconcerned about the matter and have not taste for it. "If, under these conditions false prophets should break in with their false teachings and even the devil burst in, and find [you] idle and the house swept and garnished, he brings with him seven other spirits, more wicked than himself, and [your] last state is worse than the first." (cf. Matthew 12:45)

When this happens, don't despair, but instruct one another, reprove one another with the Word of God, bearing one another's burdens, so that you each cling to God, praying to Him, "Merciful God, you have permitted me to become a Christian; help me to continue to be one and to increase daily in faith. Even if the whole world should fall, and each one conspire to do evil, and the devil break all the earthen vessels, yet I will not be turned by it, but by your divine help will abide in the Gospel."

Thus you see in this nobleman and most excellent and noble faith. He heard a single word from Jesus: "Your son lives." He believed it and went home, grasping the Word, clinging to it, not groping after other things. And God healed his son, increased his faith, not allowing him to remain in doubt or weakness. He even allows the man to hear of his son before returning home! Jesus richly manifested Himself to this nobleman so that Christians—you, dear hearers, may understand the nature of faith, that it is created, maintained, and grows purely by the Word of God.

There is nothing more blessed and joyous than to believe God's Word and cling to it in the face of all temptations, to shut the eyes to all temptations of the devil, to lay aside all sense, understanding,

reason, and cunning, to know in one's heart that God has spoken, and He cannot lie! Nothing can be more joyful than such faith. Whatever you ask of God in such faith, you receive more abundantly than you can ever imagine. And it is all summed up in what was written: "So the man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him, and he went his way."

All of this means that, believing and trusting in God, you will know that He will richly give you all things for which you pray. And your faith, such a faith as is on display in the certain nobleman, knows for what to pray. It is chiefly that which you have just heard, "Keep me faithful," though other petitions are certainly valid.

You see, Christ Jesus makes no distinction between weak and strong faith. He came into the world to receive the weak—to carry and sustain them. By His death on the cross, He has done precisely that, for where you are weak, He is strong. He is strong to keep His commandments. He is strong to lay down His life for you. He is strong to take it back up again. Everywhere you would fail, Christ Jesus has succeeded. Everywhere you would fall, Christ Jesus has stood strong. And He has done it all for you!

And let this be of comfort to you. Your Lord—your God—receives you to Himself for the sake of His Son, Christ Jesus. By His death and resurrection, your baptism into His death and resurrection, and your hearing of the Word of God, you have been given faith. And by coming here, but going to Bible studies and being immersed in the Word, your faith is strengthened day by day. You, too, like the certain nobleman, then, can go home from this place believing the Word that Jesus has spoken to you. That happens most especially in your hearing of this word from Jesus: You are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.