

Does Faith Fix Everything?

Hebrews 11:32-39 -

By Russell Muilenburg

Sunday, 11 July 2010 00:00

Hebrews 11:32-39 *Urban Legends: Does Faith Fix Everything?* **How to Survive a Snake Attack** When Peace Corps volunteers go into the Amazon Jungle, they receive a manual that tries to prepare them for every eventuality they might face. It includes instructions on what to do in case you are attacked by an anaconda, which it describes as “the largest snake in the world, a relative of the boa constrictor that grows to thirty-five feet in length and weighs between three and four hundred pounds.” It’s a simple, 10 step guide:

1. If you are attacked by an anaconda, do not run. The snake is faster than you are.
2. Lie flat on the ground. Put your arms tight against your sides, your legs tight against one another.
3. Tuck your chin in.
4. The snake will come and begin to nudge and climb over your body.
5. Do not panic.
6. After the snake has examined you, it will begin to swallow you from the feet—always from that end. Permit the snake to swallow your feet and ankles. Do not panic.
7. The snake will now begin to suck your legs into its body. You must lie perfectly still. This will take a long time.
8. When the snake has reached your knees slowly and with as little movement as possible,

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reach down, take your knife and very gently slide it into the side of the snake's mouth between the edge of its mouth and your leg. Then suddenly rip upwards, severing the snake's head.

9. Be sure you have your knife.

10. Be sure your knife is sharp. (source: www.snopes.com)

That is quite a list. Unfortunately—or maybe fortunately—it's not true. It's an example of an Urban Legend. One of those things that gets passed around on email that purports to be from a credible source—in this case the US Government Peace Corps Manual—and is so unbelievable you decide it almost must be believable. But all it truly is, is an exercise in creative writing.

Urban Legends are a part of our culture. Some, like this one, are laughable enough to see right through. Others touch a sensitive nerve in the national psyche or claim something we want to believe is true so much that it becomes a part of our narrative. For example, I've received emails saying the President canceled the National Day of Prayer—he didn't, he just declined to have a public breakfast as some other Presidents have—and I've received a picture showing him removing his shoes to attend an Islamic Day of Prayer—it's actually a picture of him entering a Mosque in Turkey while on a diplomatic visit. But I've heard both things stated as definitive facts and reasons Christians should be alarmed.

Whenever I get those mass circulation emails—if I read them at all—I like to go to a website like Snopes.com and check to see what they have to say about the truth behind them. It's a good idea to have a measure of skepticism about stories that get passed around like this.

Sunday School Myths

In the same way, I think there are Spiritual Urban Legends. Ideas and clichés that get passed around as though they were Biblical truth, but which have questionable origins.

Larry Osborne, a California pastor from whom I got the idea for this sermon series, calls them Sunday School myths. He notes that many of them are harmless—like the anaconda survival

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guide—but some can have spiritually devastating consequences. “Think of the disillusionment that sets in,” he says, “when someone writes off God for failing to keep a promise that he never made. Or the despair that follows a step of faith that turns out to have been a leap onto thin ice.”

(
10 Dumb Things Smart Christians Believe
, p. 3)

And so, for the next 5 weeks we’re going to take some of these Sunday School myths and subject them to our version of Snopes.com. We’re going to fact check some of these ideas against what the Bible says. And instead of listening to conventional wisdom, we’re going to try to get back to God’s wisdom.

The Law of Attraction

So let’s talk about our first Urban Legend: the idea that faith will fix anything. This is a common, widely held myth that goes essentially like this: if I believe strong enough—
if I have enough faith—then I’ll be able to do anything, fix any problem, or achieve whatever I want.

□

Think positively, and positive things will happen to you. You can have anything, anything you want, if you just focus your mind on it. Great health? Lots of wealth? The mate of your dreams? All can be yours if you just trust enough for it. Ask, believe and receive. Name it and claim it.

Essentially, this myth encourages us to have faith in faith. It’s the reason I tell Beth not to get negative when the UNI Panthers are watching their lead slip against the Kansas Jayhawks—“You just gotta believe.” It’s the explanation the earthquake survivor gives after being pulled out of the rubble 90 hours after the fact—“I just kept believing.” It’s what the motivational speaker says to the assembled group of salesmen—“You’ve got to picture yourself succeeding.”

According to this urban legend, the more strongly we believe something, the more likely it is to happen. The impression is that God is checking to see just how much we believe before He decides whether to answer our prayers. Get rid of enough doubts, send out enough positive vibes, and God says “Go.” But until we reach that threshold of faith—whatever it is—God just shrugs His shoulders and says, “Not good enough.”

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This doctrine of the power of positive thinking has been around a long time, but probably the most brazen example of it is a little book and DVD that came out in 2006 called

The Secret

. Within a few months of publication, 3.8 million copies were in print and it hit the top of both the *USA Today*

and

New York Times

best seller lists.

So, what is the Secret? According to the author, Rhonda Byrne, the secret—she calls it the most powerful law in the universe—is the “law of attraction.” It is the universal law that

like attracts like

. Therefore, if we think positive thoughts, positive things will happen. If we think negative thoughts, bad things will happen.

[Oprah's website](#)

—and Oprah has been one of the book’s biggest fans--says, “The principle explains that we create our own circumstances by the choices we make in life. And the choices we make are fueled by our thoughts which means our thoughts are the most powerful things we have here on earth.” (quoted by James Swan,

<http://www.aomin.org/aoblog/index.php?itemid=1810>

)

In the DVD, a woman is shown admiring a necklace in a store window. In the very next shot she is shown wearing the necklace around her neck. All, we are being led to believe, because she used the power of her conscious thoughts to attract it.

Byrne tells of her struggles with weight and makes the claim that it is not food that makes one fat—“only the thought that food could make you fat that actually results in weight gain... She also tells the story of a woman who “attracted” her perfect partner by pretending he was already with her: she left a space for him in her garage and cleared out her closets to make room for his clothes, and, lo, he came into her life.” (Barbara Ehrenreich,

Bright-Sided,

p. 60-61)

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A life coach quoted in the book talks about the power of visualization. He writes:

Many years ago, I looked at another way to represent some of the materialistic things I wanted to achieve in my life, whether it was a car or a house or anything. And so I started cutting out pictures of things that I wanted. And I put those vision boards up. And every day for probably about just two to three minutes, I would sit in my desk and I would look at my board and I'd close my eyes. And I'd see myself having the dream car and the dream home and the money in the bank that I wanted and the money that I wanted to have for charity. (quoted in Ehrenreich, p.64)

I went to the library this week and tried to check out a copy of this book, but I found out it's been overdue since 2008. Apparently, somebody visualized themselves having their very own copy of the book and, lo and behold, they got it!

The Secret

, of course, is not a Christian book. And it is fairly ridiculous. But that doesn't prevent some of the ideas it espouses from winding up in the church.

Expect God's Favor

Several of the most visible and well-known preachers in America today espouse a variation of the faith can fix anything myth. Known as the "prosperity gospel," the "health and wealth" doctrine, the "Word of Faith", the "laws of thinking" or the "name-it-and-claim-it" approach, it shows up in churches of all sizes.

The distinctive beliefs of this brand of Christianity are that God wants to bless you with health and wealth; health and wealth are a sign of God's favor; and having the right thoughts and professing the right beliefs are the keys to receiving God's blessings.

Joel Osteen is probably the most prominent Christian spokesperson for the think positive movement today. The pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston and the author of a book called *Your Best Life Now*

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, Osteen has been called “America’s most influential Christian” by *Church Report* magazine. (Ehrenreich, p. 125)

Osteen’s message has been summed up as “Just smile and receive happiness.” (Patton Dodd, <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/2007/08/Optimism-Is-Depressing.aspx?p=1>)

He teaches visualization as well as the power of the spoken word to bring your dream into existence through “positive confessions of faith and victory over your life.” At one point in his book Osteen talks about many of the “small” victories he’s achieved in his life—like getting out of a speeding ticket and finding “the premier spot in that parking lot.” He even suggests that you can speak God’s promises into your life in a crowded restaurant saying: “You can say, ‘Father, I thank you that I have favor with this hostess, and she’s going to seat me soon.’” (Ehrenreich, p. 127) In other words, if you just picture that little pager flashing and buzzing, you’ll be eating Bloomin’ Onions before you know it.

In an interview with the Christian website Beliefnet Osteen said:

I believe God’s favor is something intangible where you’ve got God’s blessings on your lives. I’m not saying it’s not a struggle, but you believe for good things.

There are so many people who don’t expect anything good in life. They don’t expect to get breaks, they don’t expect to get promoted, they don’t expect anything positive. So I just try to get people to say, I believe if we expect God’s favor, if we declare it, if we thank him when we do see good things happening, then we’re going to see more of that.

(<http://www.beliefnet.com/Inspiration/Christian-Inspiration/2004/12/Expect-Gods-Favor-Interview-With-Joel-Osteen.aspx>)

Barbara Ehrenreich, a secular writer who wrote a book called *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking has Undermined America* observes this about the religion taught by Osteen and others like him:

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Gone is the mystery and awe; [God] has been reduced to a kind of majordomo or personal assistant. He fixeth my speeding tickets, he secureth me a good table in the restaurant, he leadeth me to the book contracts. Even in these minor tasks, the invocation of God seems more of courtesy than a necessity. Once you have accepted the law of attraction—that the mind acts as a magnet attracting whatever it visualizes—you have granted humans omnipotence. (p. 132-133)

She's not even a Christian, but she recognizes that this myth does not square with Biblical faith.

What's Wrong with Thinking Positive?

We're going to look at what the Bible says about faith in just a little bit. But first, you might be wondering, what's wrong with thinking positive?

Clearly, there are some really good things that come from being optimistic:

o

Positive people are pleasant to be around. Nobody wants to hang out with Debbie Downer.

o

Positive thinking can help us overcome fears. I read about one woman who found the courage to take swimming lessons after reading

The Secret

. Visualizing herself as a swimmer helped who get over her phobia of water.

o

And, a positive attitude can help us through tough stuff. If you believe that chemo can help you beat the cancer, you'll be much more willing to go through the icky stuff that comes with it.

But there are some definite dark sides to the "you just gotta believe" doctrine. For example:

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1)

A disconnect with reality

. In order to be perpetually positive, you have to ignore what's really happening around you.

Ehrenreich does a persuasive job in her book of arguing that much of the recent economic downturn can be attributed to the business world's insistence on the power of positive thinking. She calls it "reckless optimism." If you are constantly encouraging your employees to envision success, then the consideration of negative outcomes--such as the possibility that mortgages might be defaulted or the obvious fact that real estate can't increase in value indefinitely—are ignored or even disallowed.

A lot of crippling personal debt has been assumed by people who cannot afford the things they are buying but who hold on to the idea that if they just believe hard enough they'll be able to make ends meet when it's all said and done.

2) Second, the idea that God is going to fix anything if we just believe hard enough can lead to a lot of

self-blame

when things don't get better.

If you hold to the idea that "you gotta believe it to receive it", then the opposite must also be true: "If you confess the wrong beliefs or think the wrong thoughts, you can expect to get the wrong stuff. What you think and say is what you get." (Dodd)

Thus, if you don't get that dream house or the perfect mate or the healing you sincerely believed you would receive, then according to this doctrine it is your fault. You must have been too pessimistic. You must have held on to too much doubt. You got what you deserved.

3) Or, and this is probably the most pernicious thing about this myth, it can lead to

God-blame.

If you really believed that this is what the Bible wanted you to do—if you named it and claimed it

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and you spoke God's promises over a situation and you know you believed with all your heart and not an ounce of doubt—and yet God failed to fix the situation you were praying about...well then, you're going to have to conclude that God is a liar. You're going to decide that God is unfaithful and the Bible is just a book of empty-promises.

What Does the Bible Say?

So what does the Bible say? In the Bible, faith has a lot less to do with how we feel or how sure we are about something, and a lot more to do with what we do. In other words, faith in the Bible isn't thinking positive or getting rid of all doubts, it's **the willingness to follow God's instructions no matter what.**

□

God doesn't care if we've mastered the art of visualization. He's not saying we have to get rid of all our fears or skepticism. He just wants us to obey.

For example, let's consider the Bible's most famous passage on faith. Hebrews 11. Often called God's Hall of Fame, it offers a lengthy list of examples, each one showing what God-pleasing faith looks like and what it produced. The first part of the chapter is filled with the All-Stars of the Old Testament. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses. Each gets his own paragraph describing how they acted in faith and describing the victories that followed.

But round about verse 32, the author starts to run out of steam. Instead of a paragraph per name, he just starts listing them off:

32

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets,

33

who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions,

34

quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.

35

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Women received back their dead, raised to life again.

It's an inspiring list, and even seems to fit in with the "you just gotta believe" school of thought. These guys believed and great things happened. Shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword. Women are getting their dead back, kingdoms are being conquered. Talk about name it and claim it.

But then things go in a different direction. The second half of verse 35:

Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection.

36

Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison.

37

They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—

38

the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

These folks weren't exactly finding victory in life; and yet the Bible commends them for their faith. It says the "world was not worthy of them" even. Verse 39 says:

39

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised.

These weren't the faith rejects, the losers, the ones who didn't think positively enough. These were men and women whose faith was applauded by God. Yet their faith didn't fix anything here on earth.

Instead, even when they weren't sure it would work out to their advantage, they continued to obey and serve God. And for that they are examples of faith to us.

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God asks us to keep trusting in Him. To remember that no matter what happens in this life, our forgiveness and our eternal life are secure in Him.

The message of the Bible is not that there is power in positive thinking. The Bible shows that sometimes we have power, and sometimes we don't. Sometimes we have plenty, sometimes we have little. But in both states, God is sovereign.

As a commentator named Patton Dodd has said: "The Bible is not a guide to optimism. It is a guide to hope."

The difference is that reckless optimism forces us to lie to ourselves—and pretend that things are better than they are—while hope faces the current reality head on, without losing faith in the end of the story. Hope is neither optimistic nor pessimistic: it is realistic. And instead of depending on our ability to conjure up a better future, hope depends upon God.

The Next time...

So, the next time you encounter a challenging situation—whether it's a relationship issue or a health challenge or a job change or whatever—there's nothing wrong with having a good attitude about it. Keep your chin up.

But don't fall into the trap of thinking that the way things are going to work out best is dependent on your ability to stay positive. Things aren't going to get better just because you believe they are. And, more importantly, things aren't going to get worse just because you are discouraged.

Faith doesn't work that way. God never said it did. He's not looking to see how strongly you believe, He just wants to see that you're willing to keep obeying Him no matter what happens.

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