Talk 4 – How Can I Have Faith?

Duration 30 Minutes
HTB Transcripts

Key:

P – Personal story that Nicky Gumbel tells in his Alpha talk. These may be replaced with a live speaker’s personal story or the speaker may tell the story about Nicky in the same way Nicky tells stories about others.

S – Story that Nicky tells about someone else (about a friend or a story he heard or read about).

Q/Q* – Quotes are key to the talk to emphasize a point and to enable guests to engage and relate the material. We acknowledge that some of the people quoted may not be well known in your local context, however, please be mindful of the value of what is said in the quoted material; not just the guests’ knowledge of the person being quoted. If you choose to replace a quote, it should be replaced with something equally effective to maintain the balance of teaching, story, and references to other information sources. In general, we encourage you not to omit or replace quotes unless absolutely necessary. Quotes marked in the margin with a * symbol are key quotes and should not be omitted from the talk.

Key Bible Passages are identified and you may wish to display these visually for your guests.

Red type identifies a part of the key teaching text that could be removed, personalised or altered for contextualisation.

Text left untouched is the standard key message content of the Alpha talk.

Talk summary:

- The episode address the questions, ‘What is a Christian?’ and ‘How do I know if I’m a Christian?’
- When a person becomes a Christian, they begin a new life – Christianity is about a relationship with Jesus and when you are in a relationship with someone – you know it.
- You can know that you are a Christian.
- Faith is trust – everybody exercises faith. But faith in Jesus is not a blind leap, but a step based on evidence.
- Christian faith is based on three things:
  - God’s promise – the word of God
  - The work of Jesus
  - The witness of the Holy Spirit
- The episode finishes with an encouragement to take that step of faith (it’s a free gift but it cost Jesus his life for us), based on the evidence, and an opportunity to pray, inviting Jesus into our hearts: ‘I will come in and eat with that person and they with me.’ (Revelation 3:20)
**NOTE:**

This talk uses an effective personal illustration of marriage throughout. If the speaker is not married it is possible to use the same illustration about someone else (eg, your parents who are married) or alternatively replace the illustration with another example that is equally effective. This will affect the introduction and stories throughout the talk.

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<th>P</th>
<th>Tell your own story to illustrate the beginning of a 'new life', such as a new relationship.</th>
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<td>Are you a morning person or an evening person? Some people are at their best in the morning, some people are at their best in the evening. Some people are never at their best! If I'm at my best at any time of day, it’s in the morning. I wake up really early, I feel quite lively. But as the day goes on, I get tireder and tireder, and by 9 o’clock I’m beginning to fall asleep. By 10 o’clock I really want to be in bed, and by 11 o’clock I’m asleep wherever I am! And I’ve always been like that. Even when I was a student, I was always in bed by 10 o’clock at night – and that is really sad! So I had a bit of a reputation at the university that I was at for this. But what happened was this. Towards the end of my time at university there was a May Ball, and at this May Ball I met up with someone who I’d known a little bit before: a young woman about the same age as me. And we kind of got chatting, and we started dancing. And kind of 11 o’clock came and I didn’t really notice, and 2 o’clock came, and 5 o’clock came, and 7 o’clock in the morning we started playing tennis. I didn’t even feel remotely tired. And word went round the university we were definitely going to get married – and we did! That was Pips! The point was I had fallen in love. My life was never the same again. The old life had gone. A new life had begun.</td>
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<th>2 Corinthians 5:17 (NLT)</th>
<th>And Paul writing to Christians in Corinth says this: ‘Those who become Christians become new persons. They’re not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!’</th>
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<td>In other words, he says: relationships are really exciting! And the most exciting relationship of all is a relationship with God. He says: ‘Those who become Christians.’ What does that mean? What does the word ‘Christian’ mean? The word ‘Christian’ now has quite negative connotations sometimes. But for other people it’s quite a positive word. People think, ‘Well, Christian – that means a “nice person”.’ But does it? Because many atheists are extremely nice people, but they wouldn’t want to be known as Christians, because they’re not. Other people say, ‘Well, surely we’re all Christians because we’re born in</td>
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a Christian country.’ But being born in a Christian country doesn’t make you a Christian, any more than being born in a McDonald’s would make you a hamburger! It doesn’t follow.

So what is a Christian? A Christian is a Christ-ian: someone who follows Jesus, someone who puts their faith in Jesus Christ. And, of course, how that happens varies enormously. For some people, like for me, there’s a very definite moment:

I can pin it down to 16 February 1974. Before that, I wasn’t a Christian; I was an atheist. And then I became a Christian. And I’ve been a Christian since.

For other people, they’d say: ‘Well, do you know, I’ve always been a Christian.’ I hope my children will be able to say that that ‘I’ve never known a time in my life when I wasn’t a Christian. I was brought up like that, and I’m still a Christian.’

Other people would say, ‘Well, I think at one point I wasn’t a Christian, but I am a Christian now. I couldn’t tell you exactly when it happened.’ That’s fine. C. S. Lewis used the analogy: if you’re on a train from Paris to Berlin, some people know the exact moment they cross the border. Other people might have been asleep; they don’t know that. But what matters is that you know that you’re in Berlin. And what matters is that you know that you’re a Christian now, if that’s what you would like.

And what the New Testament says is that we can know that we’re a Christian.

It’s put like this in John’s Gospel:

‘To all who received him’ – that’s to all who received Jesus – ‘to those who believed’ – in other words, those who had faith – ‘in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.’

What St John is saying there is this is the closest possible intimate relationship of love. It’s like a child and a parent. In other places it’s talked about like a lover, or like a friend. And sometimes the New Testament even uses the analogy of a husband and wife – it’s that close: an intimate relationship.
Now, if you are married, you *know* that you’re married. If you’re a Christian, you can *know* that you’re a Christian.

At the end of the course we have a questionnaire. And I’m so grateful to people for how honest they are in their feedback. At the end of one course, we asked this question: ‘Would you have called yourself a Christian at the beginning of Alpha?’ One person wrote this: ‘Yes, but without any real experience of a relationship with God.’ Another person wrote: ‘Sort of.’ Another person wrote: ‘In inverted commas.’ Another person wrote: ‘Not sure.’ Another: ‘Ish.’ Another: ‘Yes, though, looking back, possibly no.’

Now, you know if you’re in a relationship. *Supposing you said to my wife Pippa, ‘Pips, are you married?’ and she said, ‘Yes, but without any real experience of a relationship’ or ‘Sort of’ or ‘In inverted commas’ or ‘Not sure’ or ‘Ish’ or ‘Yes, though, looking back, possibly no’. God wants you to *know*.

1 John 5:13

St John writes this: *‘I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.’*

You can know that you’re a Christian; you can know that you have faith; you can know that you have eternal life.

So what is this faith, this confidence, this assurance based on? Well, it’s based on like three legs of a tripod, and each of them is essential.

**Talk Point 1**

**THE WORD OF GOD**

The first is this: the word of God. It’s based on facts and not on feelings. Because our feelings go up and down. But the facts remain the facts.

So, using this analogy of marriage, If you asked me how do I know I’m married, I can point you to this: this is our marriage certificate. This is a document that is evidence that we are married. If you asked me how I know I’m a Christian, I would point to a document: I would point to the word of God.

Sometimes people say like, you know, ‘It’s fine for you – you have faith. You’re lucky. But I don’t have faith,’ as if it was, kind of, you either have it...
or you don’t have it and there’s nothing you can do about it. But it’s not like that.

Romans 10:17 (NKJV paraphrase)

St Paul writes this:

‘Faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of God.’

Now, maybe this is something you’ve already experienced, just in the first two or three weeks of Alpha. You come here and you hear this being explained, and you think: ‘I’m beginning to have a little bit of faith.’

Another way that you can do it is by just reading the Bible on your own – reading one of the Gospels.

That’s what I did: I read the New Testament. I didn’t have any faith before – I was an atheist. But by the time I’d come to the end of the New Testament, I had experienced faith.

This is a way we can kind of interact with God. God speaks through the Bible – we’ll have a whole session on this subject. But you can begin to take the word of God and start to put it into practice. Let me give you an example.

There’s a verse, which comes – a promise – which comes towards the end of the New Testament. It’s a very famous verse in Revelation 3:20 where Jesus says this:

Revelation 3:20

‘Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.’

Holman Hunt, the Pre-Raphaelite artist, he illustrated this verse with a painting. In fact, he painted it three times. The most famous one hangs in St Paul’s Cathedral and it’s called ‘The Light of the World’ [image on screen]. And this is what this verse is saying: imagine that your life is like a house and Jesus is knocking at the door of your life and he’s saying: ‘Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. I’d like to come into your life, into the house of your life, and be part of your life. I want to come in and eat with you.’

Eating together is a sign of friendship. And effectively Jesus is saying, ‘I
want to be your friend.’ That’s what it means to be a Christian: it’s to be a friend of Jesus. And Jesus is saying, ‘Look, here I am. I am standing at the door of your life, and I would love to come in and eat with you, be a friend of you.’ [image on screen]

And if you look at this painting, you see that the door is kind of overgrown with thorns and thistles. It’s like the person’s never opened the door to Jesus. And Jesus is knocking. Now, when Holman Hunt painted this painting, people said: ‘That’s a great painting!’ But someone said to him, ‘Look, you’ve actually made a mistake! Do you realize you’ve made a mistake?’ And he said, ‘Well, what do you mean?’

He said, ‘Well, look at the door: there’s no handle.’ And Holman Hunt said, ‘No, no, no, that’s not a mistake. There is a handle. But the handle is on the inside.’

In other words, Jesus is not going to force his way into your life. He stands at the door and knocks, and he leaves it up to you and me to decide whether to invite him in, to be part of our lives.

But his promise is this: ‘If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in.’ Not ‘I might come in,’ not ‘I’ll think about it’: you can be sure that if you invite him in, he will always be with you. He’ll never leave you. And he says this relationship is not just for now; it’s for eternity. That’s what we looked at when we looked at the resurrection: Jesus is alive now! He can be in a relationship with you now. And that relationship goes beyond this life – it goes on into eternity.

So that’s the first leg of the tripod: the word of God.

Talk Point 2
THE WORK OF JESUS

The second leg of the tripod is the work of Jesus. It’s done, not do.

If you asked me how do I know I’m married, I can point to the marriage certificate. I could also point to an event that took place right here on 7 January 1978, when our wedding took place. And if you asked me how do I know I’m a Christian, I can point to an event in history: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Sometimes people say, ‘Well, I don’t think I could be a Christian because
I'm kind of not good enough. And if I was going to be a Christian, there are lots of things in my life I'd just kind of need to sort out first. I need to change things,’ and so on. No, no, no. You come exactly as you are. It’s not about what you do or what you can achieve; it’s about what has been done for you by Jesus on the cross. That’s what we were looking at last week. You receive total forgiveness. And you receive it as a gift.

**Romans 6:23 (NLT)**

*St Paul wrote this: ‘For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.’*

*The free gift. I don’t know what you feel when you hear that expression, ‘free gift’. I know for me, I think, ‘Uh-uh, no, I don’t believe that! There’s bound to be a catch.’ We’re deeply suspicious of anyone who offers us a free gift.*

Pippa and I were out for a walk in St James’s Park with my daughter and son-in-law, and it was raining. We popped into the café to get some coffee. And my son-in-law Myles ordered a café latte, and there was a bit of a mix-up and he got two café lattes by mistake. And he said, ‘No, no, I don’t want this one.’ And they said, ‘Well, no, no, you can have that one for free.’ So he offered it to us. We didn’t want it. He said, ‘Okay, I’m going to go and offer it to someone in the park.’

So, to understand this story you have to know what my son-in-law looks like! [image on screen] So this is my son-in-law Myles: he’s a rapper, and he’s a nice guy! He’s a great guy! I’m very blessed with him as a son-in-law. If you’re listening to this, Myles, we love you! So, but Myles decided he was going to try and give this café latte to someone in the park. But when they saw him approaching, they all backed away! And no one wanted to take it. And the more people backed away, the more it looked suspicious, because people could see that everyone was backing away, and I think they thought— We were all standing there roaring with laughter – I think they thought it was kind of some program that we were filming him.

So he just could not give it away. Eventually he walked alongside someone for 400 yards, chatting to them, making friends with them, and eventually persuaded them to take it – by which time it was cold! But the point is, nobody wanted a free gift.

**Alt. Example**

*Alternative example of a ‘free gift’ story where there’s always a catch.*

I don't know what you feel when you hear the expression `free gift', but if you’re anything like me – I'm cynical about free gifts, because we get,
don’t we, now you get them on your phone: you know, ‘You’ve won a million pounds!’ There are circulars that come round offering free gifts endlessly. And we always think there’s a catch — well, we know there’s a catch. I came back from holiday one time and found this circular. It said:

‘N. Gumbel’s potential million! Mr N. Gumbel, will you be the UK winner? Mr N. Gumbel is one of the lucky London SW4 residents selected. Dear Mr Gumbel, why have we selected you? Because we believe you deserve it!’ – That’s nice, isn’t it! ‘After all, you’ve been working long and hard for your share of the good things in life.’ – I don’t think they realised I was a vicar!

‘It’s time you were rewarded. You could be holding the winning number right now, Mr N. Gumbel!’ – I think they thought the more they repeated my name, the more impressive it would be!

‘The Gumbel certificate is yours and yours alone. Act now, Mr N. Gumbel, and you can have it all. Believe me when I tell you that there is no catch, Mr N. Gumbel.’

And then I looked to see what I had really won, and that was a free Datamaster. How was I going to get hold of this? ‘Enter me in the million-dollar’ – I don’t know why it’s dollars in England! – ‘dream sweepstake and rush my free Datamaster and begin my 40-week subscription to Time Magazine.’ – There's a catch.

So I went to the next letter in the post, which was addressed not to me but to my wife. And the headline of this was:

‘A fabulous award for you, Mrs Gumbell! Is it a cheque for £15,000 or is it a Ford Mondeo? Great news – you really are a winner in our Empire Star Prize Draw.’ — She had actually won something! So exciting. What had she won? Here we are:

‘Free gift: salt & pepper cruet set. This charming pair of chickens sit comfortably nesting in a wicker basket, lined in a colourful gingham cloth — a delightful addition to your dining table. Yours free if your order is over £40.’

And we’re so suspicious. And we think, you know, ‘God is offering this free gift. There must be a catch.’ There isn’t a catch. It is free. But it’s not cheap.
It cost Jesus his life. He died for you, he died for me, so that we could be forgiven and receive this gift of eternal life, this gift of a relationship with him. And we receive it through repentance and faith. ‘Repentance’ sounds a really heavy word, but all it means is turning away from the bad stuff in our life, changing our mind about that stuff and saying: ‘Actually, that doesn’t do us any good anyway.’ God loves us. He never asks us to give up things that are good for us. He just says, ‘Get rid of that junk. Turn away from it.’

And sometimes people talk about ‘the cost of being a Christian’, the cost of being a Christian is nothing compared to the cost of not being a Christian. The cost of being a Christian is nothing compared to what it cost Jesus to make it possible for us to have this relationship with God. That’s repentance.

And then faith. Faith is just trust. That’s what it means. Everyone exercises faith. You’re exercising faith by sitting on these chairs – you’re trusting that the chair will hold you up. All the way through life we exercise faith.

When I was an atheist, I was exercising faith in the fact that I believed there was no God. That was an act of faith: you can’t prove it, but I based my life on it as an act of faith. Now I base my life on faith in what Jesus did on the cross for me, and on him. I put my trust in him.

That’s the second leg of the tripod: the work of Jesus.

Talk Point 3
THE WITNESS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

And the third leg of the tripod is the witness of the Holy Spirit: it’s him and not us.

If you asked me how I know I’m married, I can point to the marriage certificate, to an event that took place here, but I can also point to thirty-six years of marriage now and the experience of that. And if you asked me how I know I’m a Christian, I can point to the word of God, I can point to the event of Jesus’ death and resurrection, but I can also point now to decades of experience of a relationship with him.

And in that verse we looked at, Revelation 3:20, where Jesus is knocking at the door of our lives, he says: ‘If anyone opens the door, I will come in’. He comes in by his Spirit. It’s the Spirit of Jesus who comes to live within
you. And Jesus says about the Holy Spirit the Holy Spirit is like the wind. You can’t see the wind. Has anyone ever seen the wind? No. Do you believe that the wind exists? Yes, of course. Why? Because you can see its impact. You can see what happens to the leaves. You can see the power of the wind. And it’s the same with the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes people say, ‘I don’t think I’m a Christian. I haven’t had any sort of really dramatic experience.’ They’re sort of expecting that they’ve got to see something: Jesus has got to appear in their bedroom and say, ‘Helloooo, I’m here!’ But it’s not like that. You can’t see the Holy Spirit, but you can see its impact. And you can see the impact, for example, on your own life, on the lives of other people. Maybe there’s someone here today and you say, ‘The reason I’m here is I saw the impact on a friend’s life, or a member of my family.’ You were observing the ‘wind’, the work of the Holy Spirit.

Maybe even on your own life you’re beginning to see a change. Maybe something’s happened to you even in the last two or three weeks. One or two of you may say this has happened: things are beginning to change.

How do we change?

**Galatians 5:22–23**

St Paul says ‘the fruit of the Spirit’ – the things that start to change when the Spirit comes to live within us is this: ‘the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.’

These are the kinds of ways the Spirit changes us. Being a Christian doesn’t make you better than anybody else, but hopefully it makes you better than you were before.

And then I’ve noticed that the Holy Spirit began to change in me the way I related to God, to Jesus, the word ‘Jesus’. I belong to a gym and a squash club. I’m a kind of a regular squash-player, but I also use the gym. And I’ve got lots of mates down there, particularly the guys who use the gym. And there are a whole variety of people, mainly taxi-drivers, there are a lot of scaffolders, there’s a male stripper, there are a whole variety of people! Most of them have absolutely nothing to do with the church. But I’ve got to know them and they’re good friends.

And I was chatting to one of them the other day, and he was just making polite conversation. They call me – they know what I do, so they call me Nick the Vic! And so he was just chatting to me about church. He said,
‘So how many people go to your church?’ So I said, ‘Well, on a Sunday we get about 5,000 people.’ He said, ‘JESUS!’ I said, ‘Yeah, that’s why they come!’

The word ‘Jesus’ meant a totally different thing to him than it does to me! Before I was a Christian, ‘Jesus’ was a swear word. Now when I hear the word ‘Jesus’, I think, ‘That’s a friend!’

Christians. I completely changed how I felt about Christians. Before, I thought they were so weird. You know, the Christians at the university I was at used to have porridge parties! I mean, who sits around eating porridge at a party?! And then I became a Christian and I went to a porridge party! And they became my friends. I liked them! They’re still my friends, decades later. My attitude changed – towards everybody. I found myself filled with love for people; interested in all sorts of people I’d never been interested in before. The Spirit of God began to change my life.

And then the Spirit brings a subjective experience to our hearts. He brings it from here to here. St Paul writes that the Holy Spirit ‘testifies with our spirit that we are children of God’. It kind of moves from faith to knowledge. What’s the difference between faith and knowledge?

Let me give you an illustration.

I told you on the first week that I used to practise as a barrister. And I did a variety of things, but I did some criminal law, and I did some prosecution and some defending. On this particular case, I was prosecuting. I was prosecuting at Knightsbridge Crown Court. And the defendant was accused of stealing £10,000 worth of jewelry from Harvey Nichols.

The evidence against him was his fingerprints were found on the glass cabinet around the jewels that had been taken. Now, normally if there’s fingerprint evidence people plead guilty, because no two people in the entire world have the same fingerprints. Even identical twins don’t have the same fingerprints. So it was pretty strong evidence.

But he said, ‘Yeah, yeah, yeah, they were my fingerprints! I’d been shopping with my girlfriend in Harvey Nichols, and I may well have put my hand on that cabinet and put my fingers around the other side, and that could be how they’re there.’

I did not know how the jury were going to decide.
Every time the jury come back, they take a step of faith. They don’t know. They listen to the evidence. It’s a very similar analogy to what it means to be a Christian: you look at the evidence. It’s not a blind leap of faith; it’s a step of faith based on good evidence. They look at the evidence and they make their decision.

So how were they going to decide? What were they going to come back with? Well, they took a step of faith and they came back and they said: ‘Guilty.’ At that moment the police officer went into the witness box to testify. At that time, the jury were not allowed to know about previous convictions until the jury had reached their verdict. The police officer got into the witness box and he testified about this man’s previous convictions: he had two-and-a-half pages – he had dozens of previous convictions for stealing expensive jewelry from department stores. And he was awaiting trial for two further cases of stealing jewelry from department stores.

I remember the jury’s faces: they went from a step of faith to they knew. That’s knowledge.

And as you take a step of faith – I’ll give an opportunity to people in a moment to open the door and invite Jesus to come in by his Spirit – as that experience begins to take place, it moves from here to here, from faith to knowledge of a relationship, knowing a person.

Another thing about the wind, you know, is you can see the impact of the wind. You can also feel the wind. And you can feel the Holy Spirit – not physically feel, but you can feel his love for you.

**Romans 8:16 (NASB)**

‘The Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are children of God.’

The love of God is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We experience his love for us.

The oldest of our grandsons is two, Albie. And please forgive me: I know telling stories about grandchildren is really boring! Someone once said to Winston Churchill, ‘Winston, have I told you about my grandchildren?’ and he said, ‘No, you haven’t. And I’m so grateful to you for that!’ But I hope you’ll forgive me telling you a story about my grandson!

He’s two, and he’s adorable – yeah, I have to say that! Well, it’s true. But of course his parents adore him, and he adores his parents. But what he
does when he really wants to be hugged, to feel his father’s love, is he puts his hands up like this and he goes to Jonny our son, he goes: ‘Hugga, Dadda! Hugga, Dadda!’ and Jonny picks him up and hugs him and holds him. And that to me is a picture of what God wants to do for us: he wants to pick us up and hold us.

To know that you are loved, to know that you are held – that’s what it means to be a Christian. That’s what it means to have the Spirit of God living within you. That’s what it means to be living in a relationship with God.

May we take a moment to – if you’d like to, just to take a moment of quiet. And if anyone here would like to pray, I want to give you that opportunity. I know it’s very early in the course, and you may not be ready for this, but maybe there’s one person here who would like to pray, and I want to give you the opportunity to open that door to Jesus Christ.

Here’s a prayer that you can pray. It’s a prayer saying sorry for the past, thanking Jesus for what he’s done on the cross for you, and inviting him to come into your life by his Spirit. Just echo this in the silence of your heart.

Lord Jesus Christ, thank you that you love me so much. I now turn away from everything that I know is wrong – all the bad stuff. Thank you that you died so that I could be forgiven. I put my trust in you and in what you did on the cross. And now I open the door of my heart, and I invite you to come into my life by your Spirit to be with me forever. Thank you, Lord Jesus. Amen.
4) How Can I Have Faith? - Nicky Gumbel - HTB Alpha