

HOW FAITH WORKS

by Ray C. Stedman

This past week I attended two graduation exercises for local schools. At each, able young orators with admirable self-assurance told us what was wrong with the world and what improvements we can expect when their generation takes control. Behind all the truly fine words there was evident one philosophy. It was that the human mind, educated to a high degree, was, in its collective manifestation, a completely adequate instrument with which to solve human problems. Now, the writer of Hebrews challenges that philosophy head-on. He says that man's reason, operating alone, invariably misinterprets the evidence, and that it was never intended so to operate; that reason is a beautiful instrument designed of God and excellently suited for the realm in which it was intended to operate, but that man's reason, as it exists now, is deprived of an essential dimension of life. That missing dimension is an absolutely necessary ingredient if we ever expect to solve our problems.

The writer goes on to point out, as we have been seeing all along, that God has spoken to man and has revealed basic truths about life. That revelation is quite different than what man's unaided reason feels is the explanation of secrets of living. If we accept the revelation and act on these truths (that is what faith is, accepting and acting on them) reason then will find its proper place and life will make sense as God intended it to do. But without faith we only struggle on in a confused cycle of bewilderment, boredom and frustration.

The writer has made clear that the revelation of God all centers in Jesus Christ; therefore the life of faith begins by an acceptance of him. Faith, as we have already seen, is a desire for something better. It starts with hope. Then it is an awareness of Someone else in life, an Unseen Someone who is nevertheless very real. Then faith involves an assurance resulting from this that obedience to that Someone will bring us to the something better. Faith, therefore, is a very practical thing, is it not? The writer is well aware that a living illustration always helps, hence this mighty eleventh chapter which is filled with the simple stories of men and women of like passion with ourselves, living in the kind of a world in which we live, confronted with the same kind of problems, who mastered their problems and overcame the obstacles and won their way to tremendous fulfillment by faith. This chapter hardly needs exposition as these accounts are self-explanatory but perhaps it may be helpful to point out five outstanding characteristics of faith manifest in this eleventh chapter. You can test your own faith by these, for here are the distinguishing marks of genuine faith.

Perhaps the most characteristic thing is that faith always anticipates, i.e., it moves toward a clearly expected event in the future.

It was Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, who said, "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forward." With that fact none can quarrel.

But without faith life must therefore be a blind march into mystery, we can not know where we are going, we do not know what is coming, we do not see what lies ahead. The future is an imponderable enigma to those without faith; anything can happen. Therefore there is always a sense of anxiety in trying to look ahead. But faith believes that God has revealed something about the future; not everything, but something. And what he has revealed is quite enough for us to know. Faith seizes upon a revealed event and begins to live in anticipation of it. Therefore, faith gives life goal, purpose and destination. It is a look into the future.

See this in Abraham. We are told in Verse 9, "By faith he sojourned in the land of promise." He dwelt there, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob who were heirs with him of the promises, because "he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God," {Heb 11:10 RSV}. Here is an illustration of the meaninglessness of time in the life of faith. It is amazing how far Abraham saw. As best we can tell, Abraham lived about two thousand years before Christ. We live about two thousand years after him. Yet Abraham, looking forward by faith, believing what God had said would take place, looked across these forty centuries of time and beyond to the day when God would bring to pass on earth a city with eternal foundations, i.e., life on earth would be lived after God's order. Abraham saw what John sees in the book of

Revelation, a city coming down out of heaven onto earth. I think that is a symbol (perhaps it is a literal city), but I think it is symbolic of that for which we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," {cf, Matt 6:10}. That is what Abraham longed for, an earth run after God's order, where men would dwell together in peace, harmony, blessing, beauty and fulfillment. Because of that he was content to dwell in tents, looking for that coming.

You can see this quality of anticipation also in Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Isaac and Jacob both knew that God intended to make nations from their sons, and their final prayers were based upon that fact. They prayed in anticipation of what God had said would come, and blessed their children on that basis. Joseph, when he was dying, saw two hundred years ahead to the coming exodus from Egypt, and he made arrangements by faith for a funeral service in the promised land. He did not want to be buried in Egypt. Thus he symbolized his conviction that God was going to do exactly what he had said. And in the course of time it happened exactly that way.

You can see how faith anticipates in the case of Moses' parents who, when he was born, saw that he was a beautiful child, a goodly child, and they decided to save him from the edict of the king that all male children should be slain. This was more than the natural desire of parents to preserve their children (even an especially handsome child like Moses) from death. But these parents knew there was a promise of deliverance from Egypt for their people, and they knew that the time was near. God had foretold how long it would be. They were given assurance that this boy was to be the deliverer. They believed that promise and, acting on that, they defied the king and hid the child for three months.

Related to this quality of faith which accepts as certain a promise of the future is a second quality, that faith always acts. There is today a very common misconception that thinks of men and women of faith as so occupied with the future that they sit around, twiddling their thumbs, doing nothing now. There is a very trite saying concerning those who are so heavenly-minded that they are of no earthly use. That, unfortunately, is the common concept of faith. But that is not faith; that is fatalism! Faith works! Faith is doing something now, in view of the future. If you are folding your hands and waiting for the Second Coming you are not living the life of faith. The life of faith is that which "occupies till I come" {cf, Luke 19:13}, as Jesus said. It acts now in view of that coming event.

Take each example in this chapter and you will see that it is one of action. Without exception these men and women were set to work by their faith. Their faith made them act in the present. Therefore, faith is not passive, it is dynamic, forceful. Listen to the magnificent summary here of the actions of faith.

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets -- who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they might rise again to a better life. {Heb 11:32-35 RSV}

That is not poetry; that is history -- faith at work. The activities of faith have changed the course of history. Yet faith does not act blindly either, it is not just doing anything. It is made very clear in this chapter that faith evaluates, it weighs the possibilities, the alternatives. Perhaps we could just as accurately put it, faith risks! One characteristic of faith is, it gladly sacrifices present advantage in order to gain the future. It does not try to have its cake and eat it too. Therefore, it dashes head-on with the common philosophy of our day, "Get it now or you may never have another chance."

Recently in the Stanford Daily there appeared an ad in response to some of the advertisements put in by a fine group called Contemporary Christians on Campus. This ad originated with a group who signed themselves Contemporary Atheists On Campus. It said in flaming letters, "Deny God now; tomorrow may be too late." There is an ironic truth about that, but the message they intended to convey was that it was necessary to lay hold of the present now because, at the end of life one may find there is no God and no afterlife and thus lose all opportunity to invest oneself in worthwhile enterprises now. That was their argument.

But do you see how faith contravenes that? Faith says exactly the opposite. These heroes of faith say to us, "Live now in view of the future, and you will gain both the future and the present!" Fling away the temporary now and you will gain both the future and, to your own amazement, find that the present has taken on fullness of meaning. It is given back to you, again and again.

You can see this in Abraham. We read, "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go," {Heb 11:8 RSV}. That is rather unusual. Here is a man who left home and went abroad without making any reservations. He went out on a march without a map, leaving his friends and his influence behind. There must have been many who said to him, "What an absurd thing to do, to go out not knowing where you are going. What is your destination?" And Abraham said, "I don't know." He did not know where he was going, but he knew whom he was going with, and what a difference that makes. Because he obeyed, the land became his and his children's. Even to this 20th century hour we have ample evidence in the existence of the nation Israel in that self-same land that the promise God made to Abraham is valid, forty centuries later.

You can see how faith weighs and evaluates in the example of Moses. We are told that Moses, "when he was grown up refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin," {Heb 11:24-25 RSV}. He weighed the wealth of Egypt and the prestige of royalty against the satisfaction of being an instrument of the living God, and an heir of the promises of God. He unhesitatingly chose because, we are told, he saw the unseen; he looked beyond the visible and saw the invisible, and he believed in him. He saw God at work and, because of that, Moses became the man, more than any other man in recorded history, who saw God doing things and learned to know God intimately.

You can see faith evaluating in the case of Rahab, the prostitute. She risked her life and forsook her pagan religion. Why? Because she believed in God and thus saved her life, her family's, and she gained God, as well. Faith is never something merely for the future, but faith says that if we invest in that future which God offers us, we shall gain both the future and the present.

There is another summary in Verse 36:

Others suffered mocking and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated, of whom the world was not worthy, wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. {Heb 11:36-38 RSV}

But perhaps the most striking quality of all is that faith dares. When God has spoken, faith ignores the contrary evidence even though it seems to be absolutely impossible. Look at Abraham and Sarah in Verses 11 and 12:

By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. {Heb 11:11-12 RSV}

Here were two people, a man and his wife, whose bodies were impotent. They had long since passed the age of childbearing. He was a hundred, she was ninety; there is not a gynecologist alive who would give them a chance to have a child -- but they went ahead, anyway. And the result was one little boy from whom came two lines of descendants, the writer tells us, a heavenly seed and an earthly seed. The earthly seed, the physical seed of Abraham, is the nation of Israel and the nations of the Semitic branches, including the Arabs. The heavenly seed are those who show the same kind of faith that Abraham did and win the gift of righteousness by faith, as Paul says in Romans 4. That heavenly seed includes many who are present in this congregation this morning, who have found Jesus Christ, the Seed of Abraham, and thus have become children of Abraham.

You can see it in Abraham again when he offered up Isaac. Think of that! His reason could see no solution to

his problem God had said to him, "Through this boy Isaac your descendants will be named." And now God was telling him to take the boy out and put him to death. Reason could never figure that out, but Abraham was not walking by reason but by faith. He believed that God had a solution to that problem, though man could not solve it. He believed God would raise the boy from the dead, if need be, to fulfill his promise, so thoroughly did Abraham believe that God meant what he said. As a result we have this amazing account of how Abraham, as it were, received the boy back from the dead, for in Abraham's mind he was as good as dead. But his faith triumphed and God gave him back the boy.

You can see the daring of faith in the people of Israel at the Red Sea and before the walls of Jericho. Here were two impossibilities. The waters were flowing before them and God said to go down and walk through it. They obeyed, not knowing what God would do. It was impossible from an earthly standpoint, but as they went forward God moved the waters back by a great wind and they went through on dry land. The Egyptians, trying to do it without faith, drowned. When the great walls of Jericho stood before them, 85 feet thick and over 100 feet high, impassable, impossible, they had only feeble instruments of warfare but in obedience to God they marched around the city seven times and the walls fell down. Faith dares. It pays no attention to impossibilities. As someone has put it,

Faith, mighty faith
The promise sees
And looks to God alone,
Laughs at impossibilities
And cries, "It shall be done."

That brings us to the least spectacular but the most important aspect of faith. Faith persists, faith perseveres. Perhaps the most amazing statement in this amazing chapter is twice given. Though these people by faith obtained much from God, yet they all died without obtaining the promise they looked for.

These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

They were looking for more than their own personal satisfaction. They were longing to see God's purposes fulfilled on earth. They were not just hoping to go to heaven when they died. These men and women of faith were looking for heaven to come to earth. They were looking to God to bring to pass his will among men but they died without seeing it come to pass. There was a special reason for this.

And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. {Heb 11:39-40 RSV}

Think back for a moment over the names in this chapter and what the world owes to these men and women. Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets. Our laws, our governments, our institutions, our ideals, our standards we owe to these men and women. They persisted in faith till the whole world was blessed. Had they given up, we would never have heard of them. But still they did not see the greatest thing of all and the reason was that God had arranged it that we, living in this 20th century, might share this race and have a part in the great prize for which they were looking. We are called to run the same race. We are called to judge the present by the future, to weigh the permanent against the temporary, the ephemeral. To dare to do the impossible against all the silken arguments of the world around about us and to keep on day after day after day, whether we are recognized or not.

Now the whole great argument of this chapter is lost if we do not read the first verses of Chapter 12:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the

joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. {Heb 12:1-2 RSV}

We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, he says.

Now that does not refer to people who have died and gone on to heaven and are looking down on us from above. I know that is a favorite interpretation of this figure here, but I do not think that is what it means.

It means that these people are saying something to us, they are testifying to us, they are witnesses in that sense. Their lives are saying that we ought to lay aside every weight, i.e., whatever hinders faith. You never say "Yes" to Christ without saying "No" to something else!

"And the sin which clings so closely." What is that? That is unbelief. That is the failure to take revelation seriously. That is the sin which is mentioned all through Hebrews.

And then, what? "Run with patience," with perseverance, with persistence, keeping on no matter what happens. How? By "looking unto Jesus," that is the answer.

The others we read of here can inspire us, challenge us, and some of the men and women of faith who have lived since these days can do the same.

I read the life of Martin Luther, and what a challenge he is; and of John Wesley, and D. L. Moody, and of some of the recent martyrs of faith, Jim Elliot and others. How they have challenged my life and inspired me to make a fresh start; to determine anew to walk with God, and to follow their example. They challenge us to mobilize our resources, clench our fists, set our jaws and determine that we shall be men and women of faith in this 20th century. But if that is our motivation we shall find that we soon run out of gas. It all begins to fade and after a few weeks we are right back in the same old rut.

The secret of persistence is in this phrase, "looking unto Jesus." The word means "looking away unto Jesus." Look at these men and women of faith, yes, but then look away unto Jesus. Why? Because he is the author and finisher of our faith. He can begin it and he can end it, complete it. He is the pioneer, he has gone on ahead. He is also the perfecter of faith. He himself ran the race. He laid aside every weight, every tie of family and friends. Every restraining hand he brushed aside that he might resolutely walk with God. He set his face against the popular sin of unbelief and walked on in patient perseverance, trusting the Father to work everything out for him. He set the example.

But there is more than example in this phrase; there is empowerment. That is what I want you to see.

We are to look away unto Jesus because he can do what these others cannot do. They can inspire us, but he empowers us. Moment by moment, day by day, week by week, year by year, if we learn to look to him we find strength imparted to us. That is the secret.

You can find strength to begin in Jesus, you can venture out and start this life of faith today in him. You also discover strength to continue. He is not "up there" somewhere. As this book has made clear, he is within us, by faith. If we have received Jesus Christ, he dwells within. He has entered into the sanctuary, into the inner man, into the place where we need strength, and is available every moment for me. Therefore, in Christ, I have all that it takes to meet life.

As Paul says, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," {cf, Phil 4:13}.

Prayer

Our Father, thank you for a living Lord Jesus who, unlike these men and women of faith, is no distant person, one that we cannot know and talk to, and draw strength from, and fellowship with, and lean upon. But he is our Lord, our living Lord, granted to the heart that is ready to receive him by a simple invitation and who is ready to trust him through life to

make available to us all that we need in every hour, whether of pressure or not. We thank thee for this great truth. Teach us to live by it. In Christ's name, Amen.

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