

What Does Faith Do?

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The program originally planned for today would not fit into the arrangements, so, I decided to talk with you about a great biblical word—the word faith. There are two questions in my theme—what is faith and what does faith do?

What do we mean when we speak of faith? A little boy once said, "Faith is believing what you know is not true." Many people in our culture think faith is naïve and credulous—faith is blind and deaf and dumb. If reality can only be known through the methods of science, then faith is superstition. Nietzsche once wrote in *The Antichrist*: "Faith means not wanting to know what is true." That probably fits a lot of people in their relation to God, to their wives or husbands, to their political parties. Faith for too many Christians is rather naive, and for too many non-Christians mere credulity.

Faith as used in the Bible has three aspects to it:

(1) Mental assent. We are expected to be convinced of something in order to become a Christian. The mind is to be persuaded by valid evidence. The center of Christian faith is God in Christ made real to us in the present by the Holy Spirit. It is becoming convinced that in Jesus Christ the most compelling revelation of God has been given to us. "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (John 1:18). In the biblical story the most urgent question is, "who is this Jesus?" A number of passages tell us that being convinced of who Jesus is stands at the heart of Christian faith. "Whoever acknowledges (confesses) me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven" (Matt. 10:32). "You are the Messiah (Christ), the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). "These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9). "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved" (Acts 16:30-31). Kirsopp Lake once wrote, "Faith is not belief in spite of evidence but life in scorn of consequences." Christian faith is the confident belief "that Christ is not an allusion but the reality of God."

(2) The essential nature of faith is trust. Faith is not only assent to a proposition, but it is trust in a person. Trust we understand. All of modern culture is built on trust—in spite of all proclamations about power and influence and contracts. The bank, the policeman, the doctor, the teacher, the politician are all made effective by trust. Just think of a young mother taking her six year-old son to school and give his young mind to another person to instruct and influence. Christian faith is trust. It is trust in a person. It

is trust in the person of Jesus to be what he claimed to be—the Christ, Savior, Son of Man, Son of God, Lord, Friend.

In these days it is not easy to trust. There is so much to make us doubt and be cynical. There are lies, deceit, broken promises, unscrupulous business practices, cheating, cover ups, etc. yet we ask you to trust. In spite of everything our culture is basically built on trust. Christians are called upon to put their trust in God. Preachers assure you that God can be trusted. Even that is not always easy. There is pain and suffering and cancer and crippling arthritis. There are earth quakes and fires and floods and volcanoes erupting. And all of these are especially troubling if you have been taught to believe that everything that happens is the will of God. There are personal problems that often seem too much to bear. My friend Sharon Rhodes-Wickett, minister of the Westwood United Methodist Church, recently wrote to her parishioners in the church newsletter: "After several years of testing and visiting many specialists, my husband, Al, recently received a diagnosis of Alzheimer's Disease." Al is only 55. In such times you have to stop and think and evaluate before you can say God can be trusted. Suffering seems to deny it. Tragedy seems to deny it. The presence of evil seems to deny it. But, if you can come to believe that, God can be trusted, in spite of everything, you will find great comfort and hope and help in your faith. It has helped me to remember that God is power, but more than power. God is also wisdom and God is love. God always acts in his full capacity as God. God's "steadfast love" endures forever. To the extent that God has made us free and responsible, God has had to limit himself. It is a self-limitation, but it seems to me that it must be real. God can't do everything. But it isn't a question of what God can do, but what God will do. God will not lie. God will not deceive, though Jeremiah thought he did (Jeremiah 20:7,8). In all the ups and downs of life, in all the confusing complexity of life, God cares for us. In Christ God demonstrated that he suffers for us and he suffers with us. "I will never leave you nor forsake you" God can be trusted. It is not easy, but it is worth the effort and worth the price.

Helen Keller could make a good case against the goodness of God—a whole life lived in the dungeon of darkness and silence. When she was being honored by a college, she arose to make her quiet speech. "Once I knew the depth where no hope was and darkness lay on the face of all things. Then love came and set my soul free. Once I fretted and beat myself against the wall that shut me in. My life was without a past or future, and death a consummation devoutly to be wished. But a little word from the fingers of another fell into my hands that clutched at emptiness, and my heart leaped up with the rapture of living. I do not know the meaning of the darkness, but I have learned the overcoming of it." Life was difficult, but Helen found that God could be trusted and that made all the difference in the world. Faith is trust in God—utter trust..

(3) Faith is also obedience. At the beginning and at the ending of Romans, Paul speaks of "the obedience of faith" (1:5;16:26). Faith has a dimension of "obedient trust" or "trustful obedience." Kierkegaard once wrote, "It is so hard to believe because it is so hard to obey." Paul says, "Faith comes by hearing" (Rom. 10:17). Alan Richardson writes: "'To hear' in its full meaning includes both to understand and to obey. Without such understanding and obedience there is no faith. Faith therefore involves personal decision, trust, commitment and obedience; it is the wholehearted acceptance of the

claim of God upon a (person), in the situation in which (that person) exists, with the appropriate response in life and action" (*An Introduction To The Theology of The New Testament*, 30).

Now we pass on to ask, what does faith do? What does faith accomplish in our lives? Faith opens our eyes that we might see. One of Matthew's beatitudes says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (6:8). Purity of heart stands for single-mindedness or sincerity—"a passionate aspiration towards the holiness of God" (Wm. Temple). Many today do not include God in their lives because they do not desire him, or they exclude God from their thinking through their presuppositions.

There are several different ways of seeing or perceiving something. If you are driving through majestic mountains and come to a summit overlooking a beautiful valley you may well say, "Look at that beautiful scene." That is physical vision. Suppose you and a friend are discussing a complex mathematical problem, and your friend explains step by step the process that leads to the answer to the problem. Then you get the picture and say, "I see." That is mental vision. You can see (comprehend) with the mind. Suppose you are in Calcutta, India. You see the poverty and disease of the people. You are stirred with compassion, with a desire to help, you picture in your mind a home, filled with orphan children, surrounded by devoted friends seeking to give the children love, security and education. You tell your vision, your dream, to a friend who says, "I see." That is spiritual vision—seeing with the eyes of the heart.

When our grandson, Gabe, was five years old, he came to his father one day and asked, "Daddy, you are going to die before I do, aren't you?" His father was somewhat surprised by the serious, searching question. He replied, "I don't know, Gabe, why do you ask?" Gabe said, "Well, you are older than I am and that means you are going to die before I do." His father said, "That is probably true, Gabe." Then Gabe said, "When you see God I want you to give him this letter. It read—

"Dear God:
I love you.
Gabe."

A small child's simple faith opens eyes to see life and death and God and love. Faith opens our eyes and helps to see—to comprehend—to discern the reality of God. Faith does not blind us to life's realities. Faith opens our eyes so we may truly see.

An adequate faith changes the heart. The biblical heart is the seat of the reason and the will, as well as the emotions. In fact, it refers to what we may call the entire "inner person." Jesus placed the new birth at the heart of his message. "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." The door that brings us into God's kingdom is the door of conversion. Conversion means a spiritual rebirth "from above" and from within. It means we turn our life toward Christ. Conversion means a new spirit, a new attitude, like the trusting of a little child. Our guilt is gone, we are forgiven, and we know we are accepted. God is our friend. John Masefield puts these words into the mouth of the converted Saul Kane—

"I did not think, I did not strive,
The deep peace burnt my me alive;
The bolted door had broken in,
I knew that I had done with sin,
I knew that Christ had given me birth
To brother all the sons (and daughters) on earth."

Conversion involves entrance into the fellowship of the people of God, the community of the resurrection, participation in the life of the Holy Spirit. The basic problem of the world has been, and still is, the problem of the changed heart. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10). A new heart means a changed life. There must be a change—a transformation, in the deep inward part of a person that will manifest itself in a new kind of behavior—not coerced but freely given.

Once in Atlanta, Georgia I was called to a home where a man was seriously ill with cancer. I soon learned that he had been a member of the Christian Church in Indiana. He had lived in Atlanta for 17 years, yet, in all those years he had not attended church one time. He did a lot of golfing. He loved the social crowd. He had many friends. But he had no interest in God or worship. As I talked with him he indicated that he wanted to renew his covenant with God. I took his trembling hand in mine and had him repeat with me the words of the basic Christian confession—"I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God." Later we celebrated the Lord's Supper together. Within a short time he became so critically ill that he had to be removed from his home and taken to a special hostel for cancer patients. When the ambulance arrived he made a strange request of the driver. Though it was a mile out of the way, he said, "I want you to drive me by the East Point Christian Church so that I might see it." He was driven by the beautiful church. For 17 years he could easily have come by the church, but it took a renewal of faith to make him want to come. Faith changes the heart—the will—the inner person—so that we want to love God and to serve him. We all need that new motivation that comes from trust in God that can change our hearts and set us free.

Faith not only opens our eyes and changes our hearts, but it also puts us to work. "Faith works through love" (Gal. 5:6). God's people live by faith and work by love. Any person who really believes the Christian gospel of the good news of what God has done in Christ for us has a job to do. The Christian faith is not merely sticking up your hand; it is also sticking out your neck. It is not merely walking down the aisle; it is also walking out into the world in service. Any vital faith leads to action. James said, "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (2:17). Much of the apathy of the modern church arises from the fact that so many of us are so good that we are good for nothing. There is too much of a gap between our creeds and our deeds. One of our hymns states it well:

To serve the present age,
My calling to fulfill;
O may it all my powers engage,
To do my Master's will.

It is amazing how many of us claim to have faith and yet do nothing to show it. Think about these questions for a few minutes: Has your faith ever been costly to you? Have you ever sacrificed or suffered because of your faith? Does your faith make any difference in the way you vote? Does your faith effect the way you approach poverty? aids victims? abortion? racial issues? the environment? homosexuals? On a more personal level, will you go out of your way to pick up someone who has no transportation, or who is not able to drive, and bring them to worship? Will you teach a class? Will you sing in the choir? Will you work in the nursery? Will you give ten hours of your time to God's work? Will you visit the ill and needy? Will you pick up groceries for a shut in? What does your faith prompt you to do? Remember—"So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:17).

Faith is a basic Christian word. Salvation is given by grace and accepted by faith (Eph. 2:5). Faith is what we all need—an adequate faith, a faith that understands. A faith that trusts. A faith that obeys. But most of all, we want a faith that does something—a faith that acts. A faith that opens our eyes. A faith that changes our hearts. A faith that sets us to work. That is the faith that is focused in the person of Jesus Christ.