



The Substance Of Faith

Among Christians around the world today there is much talk about faith. Many preachers consistently expound on this one topic. Others have written entire books on the subject. Whole denominations are even being organized centering around this one aspect of God's revelation. "Faith" is becoming quite popular.

In view of these things I believe it is worthwhile for us as Christians to take a little time to investigate exactly what the substance of faith is. If we are going to talk about faith and have faith – genuine faith – we must understand what it really is.

It is not enough just to have a natural concept or idea, but as with all the things contained in the Bible, we must have supernatural revelation to understand it. If we are truly to know what faith is, then we must have God reveal it to us. Let us pray together that God would use this message to accomplish this purpose.

Perhaps the best way to grasp exactly what faith is to take a look at the experience of the father of faith – Abraham. By examining just how he arrived at faith perhaps we can discover exactly what God's way to faith is. The scripture reads: "After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision" (Gen 15:1). Then we read: "And he [Abraham] believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness" (Gen 15:6).

The order in which these two events took place is very significant. First, God supernaturally manifested His will and His glory to Abraham. Then, he believed. His response to this heavenly vision was faith. He reacted to this divine revelation by believing that God existed and that what He said was true.

Please notice on the other hand how his faith did not happen. Abraham was not walking in the desert one starry night looking into the heavens and suddenly thought, “There must be a God. By golly, I think there really is God. Why, I believe, I believe there is a God and He surely must want me to have many descendants.” And God did not upon hearing these “words of faith” come rushing down and reveal Himself to Abraham.

No, Abraham’s faith came in exactly the opposite way. First God revealed Himself and then Abraham believed. It was this kind of faith that pleased God and caused Him to label Abraham as righteous.

What a wonderful event that must have been when God first showed Himself to Abraham. Do you still remember the time when God was first revealed to you? If you are a Christian today it is because at some time and in some way God manifested Himself and your response to this was faith. You may have said something like, “God is real. I’ve seen Him. He has shown Himself to me and now I believe in Him.” Unless God has revealed Himself personally to you through Jesus Christ, you cannot be a real Christian.

Let’s continue here with a brief definition of faith. “Faith is the response of the human heart to divine revelation.” Once God shows us something of Himself then we can believe. But unless He chooses to reveal Himself to us nothing we can do or think will qualify as real faith. Unless we have seen Him in some measure we cannot believe in Him. We can perhaps give our mental assent to something we have read or heard about God but this is not what the Bible calls “faith.” James tells us that even the demons have a kind of faith. They believe and tremble (Jas 2:19).

But saving faith – genuine faith – the kind of faith that justifies before God those who possess it, is faith which results from God’s revealing Himself. The scripture explains that faith is not of ourselves but rather it is a gift from God (Eph 2:8). This means that it does not originate within us but that God gives it to us through the revelation of Himself.

Unfortunately, not every man’s reaction to divine revelation is faith. Many people we read about in the Bible reacted to the manifestation of God’s power and di-

vinity with unbelief. Most of us probably imagine that if God would speak audibly from heaven everyone would surely believe.

Nevertheless this is not the case. Several times in the gospels it is recorded that God did just that. One time Jesus was praying to the Father and said, “Father, glorify Your name.” In response to this a voice came out from heaven saying, “I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again” (Jn 12:28).

Even though the entire crowd heard the voice of God, not all believed. Some of them said, “Surely it must have thundered.” Their reaction was one of complete unbelief. They had heard God audibly yet they chose not to believe in the reality of what had just happened.

Still another striking instance of such unbelief is seen when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. After this event, we are told that many of His disciples believed on Him. But there were some among the crowd who scurried off to report to the Pharisees. Even though they had seen the dead raised they did not believe. Instead their hearts were hardened and they went to report Him to the authorities.

True faith occurs when the human heart responds positively to God. It is not something which comes from within ourselves. When God through His mercy reveals Himself to us in some way, we are then in a position to choose whether or not to believe.

Yet, even this ability to choose correctly comes from God. The scripture is explicit that in some instances God hardens some individuals’ hearts and blinds their minds so that they do not believe (Rm 9:18, Jn 12:40).

Not only is the initial act of revelation something from on high but it is through God’s mercy alone that any of us believe. He is the only one who gives faith to men by showing Himself to them and enabling them to respond by believing. This is the substance of faith.

FAITH IS NOT HUMAN HOPE

Many people today, misunderstanding this truth, have attempted to make faith into a human kind of hope. They mistakenly teach that if you simply read the Bible, choose passages which please you and try to claim them by constantly reasserting your agreement with the truth expressed in them, that you will thereby arrive at faith and receive something from God.

This method is as difficult as lifting yourself up by your own bootstraps. No amount of continual restatement of scriptural truths will lead us to genuine faith. Only the supernatural revelation of God can accomplish this.

The scriptures read that Jesus “manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him” (Jn 2:11). Once their eyes were opened and they saw who He really was, then they believed. This is the kind of faith that the Bible is talking about.

When Peter confessed for the first time that Jesus was the Christ, He responded by affirming that this revelation had divine origins. Peter had not simply thought this up himself. His confession was not a product of human reasoning and deduction. God Himself had revealed this to him.

Jesus confirmed this by stating: “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Mt 16:17).

Unfortunately human beings are often blinded to spiritual things by worldly definitions. Just because we’ve grown up thinking we knew what faith was – that is, giving our mental assent to some idea – we imagine that this same definition will be good enough to use in our Christianity.

Sadly this kind of mental activity will never work. Only those who have seen God, and know Him, believe in a way that will cause them to be accounted righteous and enable them to receive something from God.

All too often preachers and healers of various sorts encourage believers to strain themselves, trying to make their minds believe that a certain event or healing will take place. Many times these people are greatly disappointed. In some instances they are even condemned for their failure and told that they don’t have

enough faith. It is explained to them that, in essence, it is their fault. They simply did not try hard enough.

On the other hand once God reveals to you (either through the scriptures or directly by His Spirit) that something will take place you can then know beyond any doubt that it will happen. You can respond to this revelation in the same way Abraham did – by believing. It is this kind of supernatural assurance that is the substance of faith and it is only when we have this assurance that we have true faith.

In all fairness it should be said that there is great value in encouraging people to believe when it is done in a genuine way.

Many times God reveals Himself to Christians, showing them something which they can apprehend by faith, yet they do not believe. Their hearts may be bound by fear, bitterness, depression, disappointment, darkness or any number of other things which keep them from responding to what God is revealing.

Those who are in this situation should be exhorted to lay hold of that which God is showing them. They need to be encouraged to exercise their faith – to respond with their will, choosing to believe God.

THE SOURCE OF OUR FAITH

Of course in this situation, as in other examples about which we have been speaking, God must be the initiator of this faith. It is not enough just to hope something will be true and try to get ourselves to believe it.

But if the Lord is prompting us, if He has already shown us something of Himself and His purposes, then we must believe if we are to continue walking with Him in all the fullness which is available to us.

Faith does not come merely from reading the Bible. Now before you get offended with this please allow me a moment of explanation. Truly “...faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rm 10:17).

But the reason our faith can be increased by reading or hearing the scriptures is that God reveals Himself to us through them. Pages from a book can never transmit faith unless God chooses to use them to show us something of Himself.

It is a great mistake to study the Bible, attempt to figure out what God's will is, and then try to "believe" it. This is just a natural, human effort. Such endeavors can never produce anything of spiritual value. The flesh will never produce anything eternal.

How many Christians waste valuable time in this way! Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for precisely this same activity. He said, "You keep on searching the Scriptures, for you yourselves suppose that you will get possession of eternal life [or faith] through them; and yet they are witnesses that testify to me, but you refuse to come to me to get possession of life" (Jn 5:39,40 Williams). When we open the Bible we must also open our hearts to God Himself.

Of course I am not advocating any extra-Biblical revelation. We must always weigh what we think we see by the scriptures. Neither should we be ignorant of the things which are written in the Bible. Actually Christians should spend as much time meditating on the scriptures as possible.

However, it is only when we contact the person of Jesus while reading the Bible that our faith grows. He truly is the "author (originator) and finisher (completer) of our faith" (Heb 12:2).

The point of all this is that God is the source of true faith. When we desire faith we must come to Him and Him alone. None of our own concepts or scriptural rationalizations will work. Only the supernatural manifestation of God will cause us to believe and enable us to receive anything from Him.

Let us therefore open to Him – turn our gaze away from everything else – and allow His Spirit to speak to our hearts. As we increasingly come to know God in an intimate, personal way, our faith will grow and our life will be enriched.

In closing, let me say that the substance of faith is not a small or unimportant thing. It is crucial to our Christianity. If our walk with the Lord is to be genuine

and our experience of God to be real – if we are to escape deception and vanity – then we must avoid all unreality in our faith.

We must instead give our assent only to what God has revealed to us. Once He has shown us some truth, then we know it certainly. We too can be like Isaiah who “...saw His glory and [then] spoke of Him” (Jn 12:41).

By David W. Dyer

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