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WHAT IS FAITH?

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen (Heb. 11:1).

We have said a great deal about the law being a schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ that we might be justified by faith. It certainly seems appropriate to ask the question, "What is faith?"

The Scriptures refer to faith as the "substance" of things hoped for. The word for "substance" in the Greek text is "hupostasis." The word "hupo" means "under" and the word "stasis" means "standing." "hupostasis" is therefore that which stands under or that which is foundational. Thayer says that it refers to the "substantial quality, or nature of any person or thing."

The word "hupostasis" is found two other times in the book of Hebrews. In Hebrews 1:3 Jesus is said to be the "express image" of God's person. The word "hupostasis" used here for Jesus is foundational to our understanding of God. He is the very image of God's quality or nature.

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The word is used again in Hebrews 3:14 where it is translated in the Authorized Version as "confidence." We are made partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our "confidence" steadfast unto the end. We must never abandon that which is foundational to our faith. This provides us with an interesting play on words for in reality faith is the very foundation of Christianity. It is the "substance" or "reality" of what we hope for.

In addition to being "substance" faith is also "evidence." It is the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen.

The Greek word translated as "evidence" is "elegchos" which has been defined as "a demonstration of the certainty of a thing by sure argument and indubitable reasons."

God has given to us various ways to comprehend the physical world around us. We can see, touch, taste, hear, and smell physical things. But physical things are only temporal. The things which we see will ultimately pass away. The things which most people are giving their lives for are transient. Someday these physical things will pass away with a great noise and melt with fervent heat. In the meanwhile they are subject to moth and rust and are in constant danger of being stolen.

It is the things which we do not see which are eternal. These are treasures which moth and rust do not corrupt and which thieves do not break through and steal.

The antenna by which we establish contact with the invisible world is faith.

Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear (Heb. 11:3).

All of this sounds so ridiculous and so twenty-first century that we would have to have a very strong motivation before we would abandon the physical world around us and stake our lives and our eternal destiny on something as nebulous and difficult to define as faith.

This is precisely the purpose of the law. It was designed to make men desperate so that we would turn to faith.

It is like being trapped in a sunken ship with only a few hours of oxygen available in the room. You pound and scream until you are utterly exhausted. Surely someone will come, you tell yourself, but they do not. Finally, you are virtually out of air. You don't know

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whether you can make it by opening the door and trying to swim to the surface. The distance may be too great. There may be obstacles in the passageway which will trap you. There may be cables and wires in which you will become tangled. You don't know whether you can make it or not, but it becomes increasingly obvious that you have to try.

It is in this vein that many turn to faith in God. Those who understand the utter hopelessness and futility of salvation through law have got to try something.

Our plight is like that of the lepers who were starving during the siege of Samaria. Finally they said, "Why sit we here until we die?" (II Ki. 7:3). They did not have many options, but they knew that anything was better than what they were doing.

Their daring decision to enter into the camp of the Syrians provided them with a bonanza beyond their wildest expectations. Never did they dream that risking so little would gain them so much.

So also with those who dare to abandon the righteousness of law keeping, to risk and dare the principle of justification by faith. The treasure of those lepers pales into insignificance when we remember that by faith Abraham became "heir of the world" (Rom. 4:13). By faith we can become children of Abraham and heirs according to the promise.

The Power of Faith in the Past

Faith is not just an ethereal principle which opens the doors and oils the hinges on air castles in the sweet by and by. Faith has been living and vibrant in every age of human history. It existed centuries before the law was given and it still exists centuries after the law has been nailed to the cross.

It is easy for us to document some of what faith has done in the past. A brief resumé is provided in Hebrews 11:

Through faith the elders and Abel pleased God.

Through faith Enoch was translated and avoided death.

Through faith Noah and his family were saved while the world around them perished.

Through faith Abraham and Sarah conceived Isaac in a dead womb.

Through faith Abraham believed that God could raise the dead.

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After a brief list of these heroes and heroines of the faith, we are informed that faith has,

. . . subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection . . . (Heb. 11:33-35).

No one who believes the Bible has any doubt about the power of faith in the past.

The Power of Faith Today

For years I had a narrow and parochial view of faith today. I read in the Bible, "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). My understanding of this verse was stiff and mechanical. If the Bible said it, I believed it, but I was reluctant to permit God to operate outside the realm of my perceptions and understanding.

I was like the laborers in the vineyard who felt it was unfair for the Master of the vineyard to pay all of his workers the same wage regardless of how long they had worked. It is ridiculous for finite man to attempt to sit in judgment upon our Infinite God.

Now I have come to the place where I am willing to let God be God; to confess my own ignorance and unbelief and to fall prostrate in wonder at the power of faith which I believe is at work right now in the world in which we live.

What I now say will undoubtedly be offensive to some. Several years ago it would have been offensive to me. I confess in advance that the power of faith is beyond my comprehension. I can only pray that my own ignorance and incompetence will not cause anyone to stumble.

Many years ago Bob Richards wrote a book entitled, "The Heart of a Champion." I regret that it is now out of print.

The basic idea in the book is that a champion is made by the right kind of a heart and not by the right kind of a body. The book was literally filled with exciting stories of champions who overcame

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infirmities and crippling afflictions to find their way into the record books. Here are a few examples.

Glenn Cunningham was so badly burned at the age of five that his doctors predicted that he would be a hopeless cripple. He overcame that handicap to set the world's record for the mile run in 1934.

Johnny Fulton was run over by a car at the age of three. His hips were crushed, his ribs were broken, his skull was fractured. He suffered compound fractures of the leg. No one thought he would live, but he grew up to run the half mile in 1:49.5.

Walt Davis was totally paralyzed by polio at the age of nine, but became an Olympic high jumper in 1952.

Shelley Mann was paralyzed by polio at the age of five. She overcame her illness and claimed eight different swimming records for America and won a gold medal at the Olympic games in Melbourne, Australia.

Howard Connolly won the Olympic hammer throw despite a crippled left arm which had been broken 13 times.

The man who claimed the gold medal in pistol shooting in the 1952 Olympics lost his right arm six months after his victory. He trained the next three and one-half years with his left hand and won his second gold medal in 1956. The thing that makes a champion is not your arms, but your heart.

Tennley Albright had crippled legs and the experts predicted that she would never use them again. She went on to win the World's Figure Skating Championship.

Bill Nieder broke the world's record in the shot put after being told by the doctors that the many operations on his stiff right leg would keep him from competition.

These are just a few samplings from literally thousands of life experiences which take place. On the surface these stories seem to reflect a total absence of any association with religion. I have a growing conviction, however, that they are vitally related to the vibrant principle of faith by which the penitent sinner can find forgiveness and justification in the sight of God.

What you believe has a direct association with what you achieve!

It has been stated that Neil Armstrong believed that he would be the first man to walk on the moon from the time he was five years old. We know that faith without works is dead. So in order for his

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faith to become reality, he would have to combine what he believed with what he did. This is precisely what happened.

When Neil Armstrong sat down to eat, he no doubt ate the kind of foods which would make his body strong . . . so he could someday walk on the moon.

When he studied in school he did so with greater determination than those who had no specific goals in life. Mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually his life was shaped by something which he believed. His faith became the reality of what he had hoped for. He was the first man to ever walk upon the moon.

Napoleon Hill has said that anything which the mind of man can conceive and believe, he also can achieve.

This is a powerful principle, and has unlimited applications for both good and evil. The same power that obliterated Nagasaki and Hiroshima can also light great cities and turn the wheels of industry and productivity.

The penitent sinner confesses his faith in Jesus Christ and is buried with his Lord in Christian baptism. He is saved by his faith, but not all have the same degree of faith. Some converts can move mountains and others cannot move a mole hill. Who can doubt or deny that the degree of our faith is a key ingredient in analyzing our success or failure. The very principle which helps you be a successful athlete also helps you to be a successful Christian.

Paul Cho is pastor of the largest congregation in the world. Several years ago the members of that church dared to believe that God was capable of granting them a thousand converts each month for an entire year. This was not some flippant figure drawn out of the air. It was a serious conviction arrived at in such intense prayer that Pastor Cho believed that he and his flock entered into a "fourth dimension." What they firmly believed enabled them to achieve the object of their faith. They did, in fact, have 12,000 converts during the year. Today they are having almost this many converts every month.

For those who have an ear to hear, let them listen to Jesus. He is God manifest in the flesh and without Him was not anything made that was made. Jesus said,

. . . If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you (Matt. 17:20).

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. . . have faith in God. For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith. Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them (Mk. 11:22-24).

. . . If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you (Lk. 17:6).

Jesus said . . . I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die . . . (John 11:25-26).

These Scriptures could easily be multiplied. Each should be studied in its Biblical setting and context, but please do not make the mistake of reading around and explaining away the power of faith.

Believing In Vain

The Scriptures teach that it is possible to "believe in vain" (I Cor. 15:2).

Zig Ziglar tells the story of a man named Victor Seribriakoff. At the age of 15 he was encouraged to quit school and learn a trade. For 17 years he worked as an itinerant doing a variety of odd jobs. At the age of 32 he was tested and found to have an I.Q. of 161. Firmly convinced of his intelligence he began to write books, become a businessman, and filed for patents. He even became chairman of the International Mensa Society, a group so select that no one with an I.Q. of less than 140 is admitted.

The principle of faith is capable of infinite applications. You can use it to win Olympic medals, make millions of dollars, or transform yourself from worldly failure to great achievements and sparkling fame.

All of these earthly achievements are merely an exercise in futility. Ultimately, they will pass away with a great noise and melt with fervent heat.

The one valid and eternal application of faith involves "justification." It means that deep down in our hearts we believe that the miracle of the ages has taken place. It means believing that the Infinite Creator God has consented to dwell in our bodies and make our hearts the ark

of His New Covenant. It means believing that Jesus Christ has become our great High Priest and that even now He is ministering in our behalf in the presence of God and the Holy Angels.

If you have come to believe this, then the law of Moses has served its intended purpose. God intended it to be a schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ that we might be justified by faith.

If you merely use your faith to make a million dollars or to become a successful athlete, then your faith has been vain in a very real sense. Bodily exercise may profit for a little, but godliness is profitable unto all things, having not only the promise of the life that now is, but also of that which is to come.

Grasshoppers

When the children of Israel sent spies to search out the land of Canaan, the spies returned saying, “. . . and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers . . . (Nu. 13:33).

This analysis was certainly not a manifestation of faith. As a matter of fact, it was an absolute distortion of reality. Everybody knew that there were giants in the land. Nobody questioned that at all. The faithless spies had a problem with self-image. In their own eyes they were so inadequate and deficient that they assigned to themselves a sub-human status.

Before they saw the giants they were regular people. After they saw the giants they were still regular people, but they saw themselves only as grasshoppers.

The giants remained the same size, the walled cities remained the same size, the figs, pomegranates, and grapes remained the same size, and even the spies remained the same size. The problem was in their perception of themselves.

As we rethink this biblical story, it is well to be reminded that God does not like negative reports. When the faithless spies returned with their grasshopper distortion of reality, they not only sealed their own doom, but the doom of a faithless nation as well.

This brings us to our own self-perception. Shall we as the Bride of Christ suffer from a low self-image? Shall we who are citizens of heaven go through life with stooped shoulders and broken hearts? Shall we mourn the dismal circumstances around us and whine that we too are but grasshoppers?

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How much better to live a life of faith, to believe that no matter what happens we are "More than Conquerors" through Him that loved us. Our Omnipotent God is capable of working all things together for good regardless of the circumstances. He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, and has promised that He will never leave us or forsake us.

When we "believe" . . . really believe these promises, we transcend the physical world around us and join company with those heroes and heroines of faith of whom the world is not worthy. It is the law which helps to bring us to this glorious triumph in Christ, "and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith" (I John 5:4).

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. In what way are the things which we see only temporal (II Cor. 4:18)?
2. How can faith be "substance" (Heb. 11:1)?
3. When is faith more powerful, in the past, the present, or the future?
4. How does what one believes affect what he achieves?
5. What relationship does faith have with the Word of God (Rom. 10:17)?
6. Is it possible to believe anything about which the Word of God does not speak?
7. What does one have to believe in order to be saved?
8. What does it mean to believe in vain (I Cor. 15:2)?
9. Is it possible to be humble while at the same time believing that you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you (Phil. 4:13)?
10. Is it possible for someone to be saved who does not believe he is saved?

