

Chapter 17

FAITH - A SOVEREIGN GIFT

One should never build their doctrine on experience. So many have been led astray from the Faith because they have believed some teaching, not found in Scripture but based on another's experience interpreted by various 'proof' verses. However, I do believe that scripture will be supported by experience, though it does not need such to be authenticated.

As I have wondered why the Lord has blessed me so much with the experiences I have related, I have come to a deeper understanding of the Walk of Faith, which interprets Hebrews 11 with more satisfaction than I have from other explanations. It is evident that He has led me from 'stepping stone' to 'stepping stone', having prepared them before me. This has not been because of my great 'belief', nor in answer to a deep prayer life, for I cannot boast of either. In fact, I find little in my Christian character that separates me from most other believers, unless it be my total commitment to wanting God's will in my life, and the assurance that He will lead me in that will. The prayer, spoken first beside Bridgend rugby ground, has become my unspoken cry.

I have heard FAITH described in many ways. It is believing; it is trusting; it is relying; it is proclaiming. Preachers have exhorted us to "have more faith!". Some even say that the reason many are sick, or poor, or unsuccessful is because they do not have enough faith. Indeed, some even equate this with sin! It is true that "without faith it is impossible to please God" but let us understand what faith is. In many people's theology, there is a very thin line between faith and presumption.

According to Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, the Greek word, *pistis* is translated as 'faith' over 225 times. *Oligopistos* - 'little faith' - is found 4 times with the meaning of 'lacking confidence' (in Christ). It is interesting that *elpis*, which is usually translated 'hope' (literally 'eager expectation') is translated as 'faith' in Hebrews 10:23. (KJV)

As I study the scriptures, I find three facets of Faith:

1. There is what may be called **SAVING FAITH**. Key verse: Ephesians 2:8 *"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God"*.

God in His great mercy has reached out to man through His Son, Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit reveals Him to us and gives to us the gift of FAITH, enabling us to respond in acknowledging and knowing God. There was nothing we could do to deserve or obtain this revelation. He acts sovereignly (in response to our searching - or the prayers of others?) in making Himself known. On Mount Hermon, when Jesus asked His disciples, "Whom do men say that I am?" Peter could answer,

"Thou art the Christ - the Son of the Living God." Jesus answered him, "Blessed art thou, Simon, son of Jonah: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father which is in Heaven." (Matt. 16:13-17).

This is the faith that recognises and receives the gift of salvation that is in Christ Jesus. By this we come to know our sins forgiven and have union with the Father. We are the 'little children' of 1 John 2: 12 & 13. It is my sad conviction that too many Christians I have met have never progressed beyond this level of FAITH.

2. Secondly, there is the **FRUIT of FAITH**. Key verse: Ephesians 5:22. *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith..."*

Like all fruit, faith takes time to grow. It is a developing fruit found only in the lives of those who are maturing in their Christian walk. Psalm 1:3 declares that the righteous man is 'like a tree, firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season'. We draw our strength from the streams of the Holy Spirit and it is only as we abide in Him that such fruit will grow in our lives. As I consider the fruit of Galatians 5: 22,23 I am struck by their progression. It would appear that they become more exotic or rare in our experience. Almost all new believers give testimony of a new love and joy and peace that they found at conversion. This

would seem to be a foretaste of what the Lord has for all of us. After a while, the initial thrill wears off and the discipling stage of growth of lasting fruit begins. At the other end of the scale, faith, meekness and self control are rare - even Paul himself, giving testimony of the struggle he knew in bearing the last one. (Romans 7:15 - 25).

3. There is the **GIFT of FAITH**. Key verse:

1 Corinthians 12:9 " ... *to another faith by the same Spirit ...* "

As with all the spiritual gifts (charismata) of this chapter and Romans 12: 6 - 9, FAITH is given for the building up of the whole congregation. The Holy Spirit exercises this gift through whomever and whenever He wishes. One does not possess this gift; one exercises it at the time it is given. It is not a prerogative of leadership or maturity - any believer may be used in this way to encourage the others. It is exercised when the Lord wants to encourage us as a people, to step forward against the odds.

All three facets of faith find their source in God. He acts sovereignly in placing faith in the hearts of people, and in nurturing it to growth. All I can do is yield to His working in my life, acting in obedience to His word and promptings, principally the written word of scripture. This obedience is in response to trusting that His word is true.

Thus, to me, the 'walk of faith' is that journey where the Lord leads and I follow, sometimes knowing but usually unknowing. At times He changes my direction by circumstances or 'divine appointments'. It does not require of me that I search to know His leading or His will for my life outside of what He has already declared in the Bible. My Father loves me too much to play games with my emotions. He does not call me to do His will and then hide that will from me, in some complicated 'blue-print' kept hidden in Heaven. He does not tease me by challenging me to discover His will through hours of pleading prayer, fearful that I might make a mistake causing me to fall from His will and grace. He expects me to walk in His will as far as the Bible reveals it. Then He will lead me in His particular will for me by circumstances or 'doorways' He places before me. All I must do is hold onto His hand.

I long for God's will in my life. "As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longeth after thee" (Psalm 42:1). God longs for God's will in my life! So who or what can hinder that? Do I really believe that Satan has the power to thwart God in fulfilling His will? I know that he is constantly seeking a way to destroy any of God's children, to keep them out of God's will, but it is my Father's work to keep me, not mine.

I have a picture that I am walking along a sidewalk holding onto my Father's hand. He and I are talking and fellowshiping together. I do not know where He may take me today - maybe to the delights of life's sweetshop. Tomorrow, He may take another turn - to the dentist! I have walked this road long enough to know that, if I want to spend too much time in the sweetshops of life, my Father will certainly have to take me to the dentist at some time! That is why He permits difficulties and sorrows to come into our lives for He knows that is the only way we are going to mature. I remember that our Saviour was 'made perfect through suffering' (Heb.2:10). He may take me down into some deep valley experience, but I have also learned that every valley only leads to mountains and the deeper the valley, the higher the mountain. If you want to experience the mountain top with the Lord, you will have to walk the walk of faith through the valley. Sometimes, like every child, I am attracted away to something across the road and, taking my eyes off my Father, I step out into the roadway. This is the moment Satan has been waiting for. He revs up the engine of his ten-ton truck and starts to bear down on me to crush me! Long before he comes, however, my wise and caring Father has pulled me back onto the sidewalk with Him. It is not His will that I should perish. It is not my great belief that has saved me, nor any measure of self-induced faith, but His faithfulness. All I had was a deep desire to hold onto His hand - walk in His will - and a yielding in obedience to His leading.

That to me, is faith.

Addenda: Some brief thoughts on Hebrews 11

Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as "the substance of things hoped for; the evidence of things not seen." The first phrase speaks to me of a GIFT, the latter phrase, a FRUIT.

All of us have known what it is to hope for a gift on a birthday or at Christmas. We have such an eager expectation of receiving it until, finally, the gift is ours to experience. We had hope, now we have the substance.

The second phrase, "evidence of things not seen", speaks of FRUIT. One cannot see its source, the flowing sap, but the evidence of life is seen in the fruit.

Verse 2 says that "because of faith, men were able to give a good testimony". I trust my story has been a good testimony of God's faithful leading. Without His moving me from experience to experience, I would have little to say about my life, that could honour Him.

Verse 3 - Because of faith, we can understand the incomprehensible. Not with the knowing of science, but with the conviction of the soul that comes from divine revelation.

There follows a list of examples to show us how God put His finger into the lives of men and women of the past to enable them to walk according to his will for them - and for us. These people included murderers, liars, doubters, as well as believers and martyrs. They were not all overcomers or heroes because they had great faith but their stories are recorded for us so that we might grasp lessons, God wants us to learn, regarding our own walk of faith.

To my understanding, Biblical HOPE (Gr.*elpis* = "eager expectation") has to do with believing and trusting; FAITH (Gr.*pistis*) has more to do with obeying.

Indeed, I would describe FAITH as an attribute of the heart, evidenced in obedience. HOPE is an attribute of the mind, evidenced in confidence.