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Back in the “golden days” of radio on the Amos and Andy show, Amos once asked Andy, “Why do you have those stamps pasted to your chest?” Andy replied. “Well, those are tuberculosis stamps.” Amos asked, “What do you mean?” Andy replied, “Every year when they offer the tuberculosis stamps. I go down to the post office and buy some and paste them on my chest. And I have never gotten tuberculosis yet!”

That is an example of what many people think faith is. It is a form of faith, but it is faith on a completely unreliable, unauthorized basis. Yet the common conception of faith which prevails today is that it is a confidence in some kind of magical potion or power, and that if we could work up enough of this remarkable substance, or feeling, or whatever it is, we could do anything. Unfortunately, this widespread misconception prevails not only among non-Christians but among Christians as well.

“Faith” is a very important word in the Christian life – as is evident to anyone who reads the Bible at all. The word is found on almost every page of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation, because faith is the means by which man receives anything at all from God. Without faith, as the book of Hebrews tells us, it is simply impossible to please God. It is not difficult – it is impossible! It can’t be done. Without faith we can receive nothing from God. Without faith all the mighty promises of the Scriptures are absolutely invalid so far as we are concerned. So faith becomes a tremendous power and force to reckon with and to count upon as we consider the teachings of the Scriptures.

In this series of studies, we have been looking at the way the New Testament helps us to realize the Person of Jesus Christ – who he is and what he

does. We saw in the Gospels and the book of Acts a presentation of Christ. The epistles – the letters which follow – are the explanation of Jesus Christ. These fall into three major groups:

- The first, introduced by the book of Romans, sets forth “Christ in you, the hope of glory” – the lost secret of humanity, the way by which God intends to fulfill human life and make us able to realize all the dreams and ideals we have for ourselves as to our character, our being; all those hidden longings and thirsts of the soul, written inescapably in letters of flesh in every one of our hearts. But all this is possible only as man discovers Christ in him, the hope of glory.
- The second group, introduced by the letter to the Ephesians, sets forth the wider truth of “you in Christ” – every one of us in the body of Christ sharing together the same life. Here, of course, we have set forth for us the great truth of the Church. But none of this is of any possible help to us without our personal exercise of faith.
- So the last group of the New Testament epistles sets forth what faith is, how faith works, what faith does, why it suffers, and what it faces – all about faith – that is where we get the title for this message.

I want to introduce this subject by sharing a written comment a person handed to me recently. It reflects clearly many of the questions which have been raised on the subject of faith:

How can people really believe that God cares about them as individuals? The fundamental

tenets of the Christian faith seemingly are founded upon flimsy speculations, not facts. I wish that I could believe the bases were facts; yet I find that even Christians are as torn by confusion, harassed by doubt, and pounded by conflict as the world is. In the very inner sanctuary of my own being, I long to believe. But to long to is to long in vain. The fundamental simplicity of the New Testament delights me, but it gives me no hope, no stronghold, and no joy. You announced a wonderful principle, but who among us is able to make it workable? Not I. How much can we really believe about this elusive power of love? This is the paramount problem. I am not capable of understanding nor pondering these mystical abstractions, but I try.

That is an eloquent expression of the position which many people have in regard to faith. The problem with this person, as with many of us, is that we are looking at our faith and trying to analyze it, thinking that if we can understand exactly what faith is, we somehow can produce it. Here is where the problem lies. For the strange thing about faith is that, though it is absolutely essential to experiencing anything from God, yet when you begin to examine it in your own life, it disappears. It flies out the window. You can't find it anywhere. You can't get your fingers on it. You can't pin it down. It seems impossible to define. The reason is that faith, in itself, is of no value whatsoever. In fact, it cannot even exist in itself. So the minute we try to look at it, it isn't there.

This is like the trick of trying to grab your thumb with the same hand. Have you ever tried that? Hold your thumb up and grab it before it disappears. I have never been able to do it, though I have tried for years – ever since I was a little boy. That is like trying to analyze faith.

The reason for this is that faith is produced only as we set our eyes upon the facts on which it rests. When we look at the facts, faith comes very naturally. The amazing thing is that the easiest thing in all the world for a human being to do is to believe. Over and over and over I hear these words – I have heard them for thirty years or more – they are the most widespread excuse for people either not being Christians or, having been Christians, not appropriating anything from Christ: “I just can’t believe.” But that is the one thing that human beings, by their very nature, are constituted to do.

The proof of this is found in the first of the great epistles on faith, the letter to the Hebrews, in a very well known passage in the eleventh chapter – the Westminster Abbey of Scripture, the Hall of the Heroes of Faith – Verse 6:

And without faith it is impossible to please him [God]. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. {Heb 11:6 RSV}

In other words, that is the minimum level of faith. That is the one thing necessary for human life, for the development of human fulfillment – in other words, for salvation. If we do not draw near to God we cannot be saved. Therefore, if faith is not possible to any human being, he is outside the bounds of salvation and redemption. But this is not true. Every human being can believe. That is what he is made for. Human nature is made to believe. We were made to be dependent creatures. We were made to be continually drawing upon another's resources. We are continually relying on something else. That is belief. Thus, the one characteristic which we have as human beings is the capacity to believe. We automatically do it. All day long we are believing. If you are sitting in a chair, you believe it will continue to hold you up. If you are under a roof, you believe it is adequately supported and is not going to crumble and fall on you. All through our life we are continually, unendingly believing. Therefore, faith is the most automatic response of the human spirit.

The problem, you see, is that we need to fix our attention upon facts, because the process of human activity always follows the same channel, no matter what realm of life is involved. It is impossible for us to prove anything completely before we experience it. Therefore, the idea some people advance – that they are not going to believe until they see the proof of Christian faith – is totally ridiculous, because it is simply impossible to prove any fact without experiencing it. Apart from experience there is nothing we can prove, even to our own satisfaction. All we can do is come to as good an evaluation by reason as we possibly can, and then plunge in and try it – test it, leap out on it, put our weight upon it. This we do continually all day long. This is the process of believing.

When we come to the epistles about faith, we find this same process is followed. In the letter to the **Hebrews**, the subject is “What Is Faith?” It is illustrated positively for us in the Old Testament through the lives of Moses, Joshua, Melchizedek and Aaron. And the negative is brought forth as well, so that we see what faith is not, and what the results of not believing are. As we work through this letter we discover that faith is simply an awareness that there exist certain invisible realities which we cannot perceive with our five senses, but which we are nevertheless convinced exist by the evidence brought before us. After we have come to a certain level of knowledge concerning these facts, we are expected then to test them and try them. Our only other alternative is to draw back. The whole book of Hebrews is written to warn us what happens if we draw back and don’t make the test, don’t take the plunge – won’t take it. All through this letter warnings are interspersed about what happened when men drew back after they had had all the evidence they needed that a fact existed upon which they could rest their faith.

When you come to the eleventh chapter, you have the great record of men and women who did exercise faith. And they always did it in rather simple terms. There is nothing very dramatic about them. Only a few of them are what we would call “leaders of men,” or “outstanding” characters. Many of them are obscure personalities – common, ordinary people, like you and me. But in every case they were aware of certain facts which were propounded to them, but which they could not prove completely. Nobody could. But they finally became so convinced by the evidence being presented to them that they were willing at least to venture, to put it to the test. Over and over that is the story of the eleventh chapter; e.g., Verse 8:

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}

He couldn’t prove where he was going. But, having received the word which he could not deny came from God – certain evidence which was overpowering to him, which he had at least to accept as being there, and undeniable – he ventured out upon the call. And the journey took him into the experi-

ence by which all that had been promised became available to him. That is all that faith is. We strengthen our faith not by looking at it but by concerning ourselves again with the facts upon which faith must rest.

That is why the Scripture says, “... faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God,” (Rom 10:17 {KJV}). The word of God has a quality about it that awakens faith. That is the amazing thing about this book. As you read it through and reread it and study it and think about it and meditate upon it, there comes a quiet conviction to the heart, “This must be true!” This is the basis upon which faith then is invited to act.

There also comes with faith, immediately, a doubt. All of us experience this. There is nothing wrong with it, nothing abnormal about it. We say, “Yes, this must be true.” And then a voice says, “Ah, yes, but maybe it isn’t, too.” So we are put in the place where we can have no further evidence until we venture. Faith is simply that willingness to venture – to reckon upon what God has said, to step out upon it. And then the answer comes, the proof follows, invariably. That is the entire record of Scripture.

Now, I have dwelt upon the subject of faith at length in order to help us see more clearly what faith is as we go through these epistles. Faith, as the book of Hebrews tells us, is “the assurance of things hoped for” – what you long to be, what you long to see in your life – based upon “the conviction of things not seen,” {Heb 1:1 RSV}. What brings you to that conviction? Simply the remarkable quality about the word of God that rings a bell in our hearts and says, “This is true;” that is all.

We have, of course, the evidence of those who have ventured before us and have given testimony to us that what they ventured upon was found trustworthy. That is what Hebrews 12:1 means: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses ...” They are all talking to us, telling us, “Come on in – the water’s fine! It works. Try it and see.” We are continually being exhorted to venture out in faith.

So don’t try to examine your faith to see how much or how little you have. Look at the facts. Look at what Scripture says is true. Read it again and again. Study it. Think it through. Meditate upon it. As you do, there comes – gradually sometimes, or sometimes suddenly – that awareness: “Well, it is worth a venture anyway. Let’s try it.

It sounds as if it might work.” Then you venture, and when you do you have the fact. Then you have the proof. That is the message of Hebrews.

The epistle of **James** is a practical book. James was a brother of our Lord in the flesh, a half brother. Yet the amazing thing about the letter of James – and the letter of Jude, who was also a half brother of our Lord -- is that there is no reflection of the human relationship with Christ here at all. Interestingly enough, neither James nor Jude inherited any of the mantle of Christ. This isn’t a family affair. Jesus was the Son of God, and they came to recognize him as such. But they had no positions of privilege or power because of their relationship to him. In his letter, James sets forth for us what faith does. The key to the letter is found in Chapter 2, Verse 26 – that well-known verse:

For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead.
{Jas 2:26 RSV}

All that James is telling us is that it really isn’t faith until you have ventured. That is what he is saying. We are so prone to say. “Well, yes, I do believe that such and such is true, but don’t ask me to try it or to do anything on that basis.” We call that faith, but it is not faith. It is not faith for me to say, “I know that chair will hold me.” I can stand here all night and say, “I know that chair will hold me. I believe that it will. I have confidence that it will. I am certain that it will.” But that is not faith. It is only mental conviction. Faith is when I go over and sit down on it. This is what James is saying. It is not faith until you have tried it, until you have ventured on it. Faith that does not venture, he says, is dead.

Therefore, when faith does venture, it will accomplish certain things:

- First of all, it will stand up under temptation.
- Second, it will not show respect for persons.
- Third, it will be kind and responsive to the needs of those round about.
- Fourth, it will watch its tongue and what it says.

- Fifth, it will cause strife and jealousy and bitterness and envy to cease among Christians.
- Sixth, it will teach patience and prayer.

All through the letter you will find the most practical things resulting from the venture of faith.

The two letters of **Peter** come from the disciple who, in his impulsive brashness, declared that he would never deny the Lord. He was perfectly sincere when he said, “Lord, the others may fail you, but you can count on me.” That very night, as Jesus had warned him, he betrayed the Lord with a curse and denied him three times before the cock crowed. He went away into the night with Jesus’ words ringing in his ears, “When you have turned again, strengthen your brethren,” {Luke 22:32b RSV}.

When you turn to the letters of Peter, you find that this is what he is doing. He is strengthening his brethren in the midst of the trial of faith. For the things which make faith tremble are trial and testing, hardship and suffering, strange things which happen to us, unusual catastrophes which come into our lives out of the blue. These things make us fearful, and we ask, “Why?” Peter answers that question. Why do these things happen? Because faith makes us a part of the life of Jesus Christ. And to reach the people of a lost and rebellious world costs pain, and suffering, and heartache, and the willingness of love to put up with rebuff and rebuke, and still to follow after them. We become part of that. Peter is simply saying that in the hand of the Lord we are the instruments by which he is fulfilling the work that he does in this world. As Paul put it in Colossians 1:24: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church,” {Col 1:24 RSV}. That is the reason for the trials of faith, the answer to why faith suffers.

Then, when you come to the three letters of **John** you discover how faith works. The key verse is in Chapter 3, Verse 23, of the first letter:

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. {1 Jn 3:23 RSV}

That is how faith works. It believes continually and is continually venturing – today one venture, tomorrow another; this moment a step of faith, the next moment another step of faith. As you see in the first letter of John especially, this will take the form of walking in the light, first of all; manifesting love, second; and reflecting the life of Christ, third.

- Light, love and life are the themes of 1 John.
- In 2 John the theme is the truth.
- In 3 John it is obedience in the position of responsibility and leadership.

So faith works by a continual walking, step after step after step. This is the walk of faith.

In **Jude** you come to the book that sets forth the perils of faith. The interesting thing about this book is that when Jude sat down to write it he planned to write on something else. He says in the third verse that he was “eager to write to you of our common salvation,” {Jude 1:3b RSV}. I don’t know whether he knew it or not, but Paul had already written on that subject in the letter to the Romans. It was not necessary for Jude to write on it, though he had planned to write a treatise on the common salvation. However, when he began to write, the Holy Spirit guided him differently, and he ended up writing and appealing to them “to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints,” {Jude 1:3c RSV} In this letter we find the subtle perils which will undermine faith and keep it from venturing upon the promises of God. As we read it through we learn what they are. There is libertinism, i.e., the desire to have your own way. There is immorality. There is greed. There is false authority, divisiveness, worldly people, and all the other perils upon the pathway of life. But Jude closes his letter with these admonitions (Verses 20-21):

But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith [that is the key; that is the operative word]; **pray in the Holy Spirit** [that is the exercise of faith]; **keep yourselves in the love of God** [that, again, is the exercise of faith]; **wait for the mercy of our**

Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. {Jude 1:20-21 RSV}

All this is the continual exercise of faith. Now, it is possible for us to have great possessions in Christ without any or very little experience of exercising faith. That is why the continual exhortation is to be strong in faith – not by looking at our faith, but by looking at the great facts which God has set before us. As we contemplate these facts which God himself has uttered – a God who cannot lie – and we think about them, and as we remember how many others have stepped out upon these promises and have found they work, and as we read and think about the underlying foundations which God has deeply laid in human history, we find there is an awakening within us of the urge to venture. Then do it! That is the test. There is the crisis. When you feel a sense of being led to try it, to dare it, then respond!

The book of Hebrews tells us of the great complaint which God had against his people. It is recorded for us in the fourth chapter, Verse 2:

For good news came to us just as to them; but the message which they heard did not benefit them, because it did not meet with faith in the hearers. {Heb 4:2 RSV}

The message came with all its mighty proclamation of fact, but it didn’t do any good because they didn’t respond when faith was awakened with them – they didn’t venture out upon it. But there is no limit to what you could accomplish, no limit to the mighty promises you can see fulfilled in your own life, when you begin to step out upon them.

That is what faith is.

May God increase our faith.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for this look at your mighty Word. And we feel our need, Lord, in this respect. But we know that it doesn’t do any good to look within and to try to feel around and find out and weigh how much faith we have. We thank you that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. Give us an open ear.

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Give an illuminated understanding which hears these words as we have never heard them before. Let them come with brilliant clarity to our hearts, that we may waken

and leap up and respond and say, “Thank you, Lord. On the basis of this promise, I will step out and be what you want me to be.” For we pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.

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