

Dealing with Doubt

by Ray C. Stedman

Our last study in Hebrews 6 revealed a very sobering possibility. We may look back upon a conversion experience accompanied by joy, release, and forgiveness – it may have been twenty or thirty years ago. But the opening verses of Chapter 6 make very clear that, if there is no permanent change in our life today as a result of that conversion experience, then we have only been kidding ourselves: We are not Christians. Despite the religious activities we may have faithfully performed in the intervening years, if we are still the same persons in our dispositions and attitudes, our reactions to other people, then we are not Christians. We are still without life – dead!

The unmistakable sign of true Christian life is the existence of a love that desires to help others, that seeks to minister to others at cost to self. If that love is present, even in some small degree, it is proof that we are truly Christians. But we can have even that without any sense of assurance, of security in this relationship. It is very possible, therefore, to be a Christian and still be troubled with doubts, fears, anxieties, and uncertainties about our relationship to Christ. That is where we shall begin today.

Last week I received a letter from a Christian boy in the service who is tormented with doubts about his faith. He expressed his concern very openly. He said, in part,

“I think I’ve lost my faith in the power of prayer. It seems like I have asked so many things in Christ’s name that weren’t answered. I get the skeptical feeling that it would have happened one way or the other whether I asked or not. If it comes out the way you ask, then you say, ‘My prayer was answered’; if it doesn’t, you say, ‘God chose

not to answer it this way’ or ‘He’ll answer it later if I keep praying, etc.’ I haven’t by any means rejected Christianity but I can’t, no matter how much I want to, give myself wholeheartedly to a way of life I am so uncertain about. But it’s really rough, riding on the fence.”

I appreciate the honesty of that letter. There may be many of us who feel the same way who are not honest enough to say so. I would like to let this climate of doubt, expressed by that letter so simply and forthrightly, be the launching pad for the rocket of faith (always the answer to doubt), which this passage will bring before us. The writer cites the example of Abraham, one of the great rocket launchers of all history, the man called in the New Testament “the father of the faithful,” {cf, Rom 4:16-18}. To exercise the kind of faith Abraham exercised is to become children of Abraham, and heirs of his promises.

This incident from the life of Abraham will show us what makes faith strong. Here we learn **the reason for faith**, the ground of our hope.

For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one better by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, “Surely I will bless you and multiply you.” And thus Abraham, having patiently endured, obtained the promise. Men indeed swear by a greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he interposed with an oath, so that through two unchangeable things, in which

it is impossible that God should prove false, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. {Heb 6:13-20 RSV}

Genesis records that God appeared to Abraham and made him a promise: “Through your seed shall all peoples of the earth be blessed,” {Gen 15:13, 22:17-18}. The immediate seed was Isaac, born of Abraham’s old age; but the ultimate Seed is Christ. It is through faith in Jesus Christ that this promise is fulfilled, and all the peoples of the earth are blessed in Abraham. This promise was later confirmed by an oath, God swearing by himself that he would fulfill what he had said. The writer is simply pointing out that Abraham believed God’s promise and his oath.

Why did he believe it? Not because he immediately saw it fulfilled! There were twenty-five long, weary years before Isaac was born, and in the meantime, Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were growing older and had passed the time of life when it was possible to have children. Still the promise was unfulfilled. Abraham did not believe it because he saw immediate results. Nor did he believe because he was doing his best to accomplish it. There was one occasion when he began to waver in faith and thought he had to help God out. He concocted an ingenious scheme to fulfill the promise of God, and the result was the birth of Ishmael who became a thorn in the side of Israel from that day to this.

Then why did Abraham believe God’s promise? Let me read from Paul’s letter to the Romans in Chapter 4, where he writes of Abraham:

He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. {Rom 4:19-21 RSV}

“God was able.” Abraham’s faith rested on the character of God. That is always where faith must rest. As the writer points out, this is also true among men. A man’s word is no better than his character. Even if you get a man to sign a contract or agreement, that agreement is no more than a scrap of paper if the man who signed it does not intend to fulfill it. It is no better than the man who makes it. Even in our courts of law and affairs of business this is true. All faith ultimately rests on character.

Abraham believed that God told the truth about himself, and God was true to his own character which he had expressed in two separate ways:

- First, the promise, and
- Second, the oath by which he swore to fulfill that promise.

Without seeing any results for twenty-five years, Abraham hung on to the character of God. He never said to himself during that time, “I’ve tried it and it doesn’t work,” or “I’ve got to convince myself that this is true, even though I secretly believe that it is not.” He said, “The God I know exists is the kind of a God who will do what he says he’ll do.” For twenty-five years Abraham hung on to that promise. And he won!

Now I come back for a moment to my service-friend’s letter. He raises a question about prayer. He says, “I’ve tried prayer but it doesn’t seem to work.” It seems to me that is putting things the wrong way. That is really repeating the common myth of our day, “seeing is believing.” Have you ever said that? “If I see it, then I’ll believe it.” No greater lie was ever foisted upon the human race by the father of lies than this, that seeing is believing. We are utterly convinced that is the way to come to the knowledge of truth, but the man who sees no longer needs to believe. Faith is not sight, nor sight faith.

You ask me why I believe in prayer? Well, not because I have tried it and it has worked. I believe in prayer because Jesus Christ says that prayer is the secret of life and I believe him. Jesus Christ says that man must either pray or faint, one or the other, that he either finds the keystone to life in prayer or, lacking it, life begins to come apart at the seams. Because it is Jesus Christ who says

this, I believe him, and, therefore, I pray and find it works – for it is the secret, he has been telling the truth. The proof of prayer does not come from my experience; that is simply the demonstration of what I have already believed, and I believe it because of who said it. Believing, therefore, is seeing. That is the true statement.

This is true on many levels of life. Albert Einstein did not come to the knowledge of relativity by performing a series of experiments which ultimately convinced him that relativity was true. He gradually saw the concept of relativity, and, convinced in his own mind that this was the secret of the physical universe, he performed experiments that he might demonstrate it to others. This is the way of truth. Believing is seeing.

This, therefore, is the secret of faith; it rests on the character of Jesus Christ. Either he is telling us the truth, and we can trust what this One who is like no one else who ever appeared in human history says to us, or we must reject him and repudiate him as a self-deceived impostor who attempted to foist some crude and foolish ideas upon the human race. That is where faith rests. From that ground everything else must follow.

“We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as our forerunner.” It is in the person of Christ that all Christian faith rests at last. He is our forerunner. Not only has he made promises but he has himself demonstrated them. What has happened to him is what will happen to us. Now, if this be true, then our faith will be strengthened as we see more clearly the character of the One with whom we have to deal. This is why the author moves immediately to the matter of the high priesthood of Melchizedek.

Again and again in this letter he has used this phrase, “a high priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.” The sheer repetition of it indicates there is something very vital hidden here. Now we shall see what that is.

In this next section from Chapter 7, Verses 1 through 26, we have **a portrait of our helper**. The incident upon which it is based comes again from Abraham’s life, recorded in the fourteenth chapter of Genesis, the story of Abraham and Melchizedek. As Abraham was returning from battle with the five kings, a stranger met him and blessed him, and

Abraham gave tithes to this man. Melchizedek steps suddenly out of the shadows of history, to appear on the stage of Scripture. Perhaps we shall be greatly helped to understand if we view this incident as a movie depicting the life of Christ.

For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham, returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him; and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. He is without father or mother or genealogy, and has neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever. {Heb 7:1-3 RSV}

This is like a motion picture in which a well-known star plays the part of a historical character, as, a few years ago, Raymond Massey played the part of Abraham Lincoln. Throughout that movie you did not see Raymond Massey, but you saw Abraham Lincoln, for, within the scope of a movie, the star is no longer himself, but is for all practical purposes the very character whose role he is interpreting. This account in Genesis is that kind of a scene.

Here is an ordinary man named Melchizedek, a priest of the true God, who lived in the village of Salem (later known as Jerusalem) and who met Abraham returning from battle. For the moment, he is fulfilling a role which beautifully pictures the ministry of Jesus Christ to us today.

In passing let me add this, Hollywood could never duplicate this, for in their movies they must of necessity have the star play the part of a man of the past, but when God directs a movie, he has his man play the part of the Man of the future!

Now let us look more carefully at this passage to see the meaning of this ministry of Christ’s, first by comparison with Melchizedek:

- There is a word of reciprocity in these first two verses: Melchizedek met Abraham and gave to him bread and wine which are the symbols of life and strength, the very things that we partake of when we come to the Lord’s table. Abraham, in turn, gave tithes of everything he possessed to Melchizedek.

Now, the tithe, or tenth, is always the mark of ownership. To pay a tenth is to indicate that God owns the whole. In symbol, therefore, Abraham was saying to Melchizedek, "The One whom you depict has the right of ownership over everything in my life." And in this movie of the ministry of Jesus Christ we see enacted a very important principle: Abraham and Melchizedek become available to each other. The provision of strength from Melchizedek exactly equaled the degree of commitment on the part of Abraham.

This is what the New Testament says to us. You may exercise dominion to the same degree you are prepared to submit to the dominion of Jesus Christ in your own heart. You can fulfill your God-given right as man to be king over all you survey, to the same degree you are prepared to recognize the Kingship of Jesus Christ in your own life. You can have as much of Christ as, in turn, you are ready to permit him to have of you.

- Then there is a word of authority here: "He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace."

What is it that Jesus Christ can give you today? What does his present ministry make possible in your life right now? He can give you only what he is, that is all. It takes Christ to be a Christian! We need what he is in order to be what he was, and what he *is* is revealed in his names. He is first of all, "king of righteousness," i.e., he is the one who has the secret of right conduct, the principle, the divine program which results in proper behavior. He is the king of that, he controls it. He is also the king of peace. May I use the equivalent modern term for that phrase? Mental health! He is the king of mental health, the king of peace. He holds in his hand the secret of rest, of inner calm, of that adequacy within which gives poise, power and purpose to human life. This is so desperately being sought today.

- Then there is a word of continuity here: "He is without father or mother or genealogy, and has neither beginning of days or end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever."

In the movie of Melchizedek that we are looking at here, all this verse means is that there is no mention made of Melchizedek's ancestry, his pedigree or any record of his birth or death. He was a perfectly normal man, all these things were true of him, but the silence of the record is taken as an illustration of the eternal, changeless, unending priesthood of Jesus Christ. This means he is available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year, throughout every year of a whole lifetime.

Someone said to me the other day, "How much time do you spend with the Lord each day?" I looked at him, and said, "Twenty-four hours. How much time do you?" And he said, "Oh, no, what I mean is, how much time do you have for your quiet time every morning, your time with the Lord?" "Well," I said, "I do try to have a quiet time every morning. Sometimes I miss, but that doesn't mean I haven't had time with the Lord. I have discovered from the New Testament that I have time with him twenty-four hours a day. I am never out of his presence, I am never shut off from his resources, I am never separated from his wisdom, or his peace, or his truth." That is what the Melchizedek priesthood means, and what the world is so mightily hungering after today.

Now let us take another look at this from the negative point of view. In the next section we see the ministry of Jesus by contrast with the Levitical priesthood. Here is indicated the incompleteness and weakness of every source of help outside of Christ. As we sing in the old hymn, "All other ground is sinking sand."

1. First, it is evident that Christ is superior to the Jewish priesthood. We shall move quickly here for it is not necessary to spend much time in exposition.

See how great he is! Abraham the patriarch gave him a tithe of the spoils. And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to take tithes from the people, that is, from their brethren, though these also are descended from Abraham. But this man who has not their genealogy received

tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. Here [i.e., in the Levitical priesthood] tithes are received by mortal men; there [in the Melchizedek priesthood], by one of whom it is testified that he lives. One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him. {Heb 7:4-10 RSV}

We have already seen in this letter that the job of a priest is to make one fit for life, able to cope.

May I again substitute a modern term for the word *priest*, one which perhaps we will understand a bit better? The modern equivalent of the priest is the *psychiatrist*! That is his job, is it not, to make you fit for living? Not only fit to live, but fit to be lived with! The Levitical priests of the old order were an ancient type of psychiatrists. They offered help to men and women in the problems of living. Read the Old Testament insightfully and you will see that is exactly the function they fulfilled. They were there to help others with the problems of guilt, stress, confusion and uncertainty.

Now the argument of the writer here is very simple: He points out that these Levitical priests derived their authority by descent from Abraham. Therefore they could never acknowledge any greater help than Abraham could have offered. But Abraham acknowledged the supremacy of Melchizedek by paying tithes to him. Therefore, the help available in the Levitical priests was, by comparison, incomplete, secondary, limited and temporary. These priests were limited by the humanity of Abraham, just as any psychiatrist or psychologist today is limited by his own humanity. He can only go so far. The help he gives may be very real. Let us not confuse the issue or refuse to face facts. Psychiatrists and psychologists can often give much real help but only to a degree, only within a limit, only so far. That is the argument of the writer here.

2. Just how far is revealed in this next division where we learn that the ministry of Jesus Christ supersedes the Law:

Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. For the one of whom these things are spoken [i.e., Christ] belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, who has become a priest, not according to a legal requirement concerning bodily descent but by the power of an indestructible life. For it is witnessed of him, "Thou art a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek."

On the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect); on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God. {Heb 7:11-19 RSV}

One thing clearly marked the fact that the old priesthood was no longer acceptable as help for men. It was the appearance of a new priest with a different address and a different ancestry. And if the old priesthood went, the Law had to go too. That is the argument here. This new priest had a quite different address; he came from the tribe of Judah instead of the tribe of Levi. Judah was not a priestly tribe at all, but a kingly tribe. The new priest was a king. Obviously, some change has been made. If God recognizes Christ as a priest, then there has been a change made, the Law which was part of the old priesthood has been set aside.

Also, the new priest has a different ancestry. It was not necessary for him to trace his genealogy back to Abraham. No, as a priest he

has no genealogy, he ministers in the power of an endless life. He had no beginning, no ending, but continues forever. Therefore the Law, which is only temporary, must go. It had an inherent weakness in that it could not supply what the flesh in its frailty lacked. Every priest, every psychiatrist, every counselor, every behavior-consultant, whether he realizes it or not, is continually working with the Law. How? By seeking to relate people to reality. That is basically what the Law is, the revelation of reality. It is the way things are. Any knowledgeable psychologist or psychiatrist tries to help the people who come to see things as they are. That is their entire ministry. There is nothing else they can do. But even that is sometimes a very difficult help to render.

Recently Dr. Henry Brandt, the well-known Christian psychologist, was speaking to a number of us in a private meeting. He referred to James, Chapter 3, Verse 14: "But if you have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth." Dr. Brandt said this is very illuminating, for it reveals what we usually do when we have strife, envy, bitter jealousy or selfish ambition in our hearts. We cover it over and glory, actually boast, in our ability to pretend that we do not have it there. Thus we lie against the truth.

Have you ever said to someone, "You know, I felt like telling that fellow off, but I didn't say a word. I smiled sweetly and didn't say a word. But it burns me up to have him do a thing like that." Do you know what is the worst thing about that? We think it is Christian! We think we have done the Christian thing because we have covered up our enmity and hidden it away, play-acting and pretending it was not there. But James goes on to point out that it comes from a low source, "the wisdom which is not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish," {Jas 3:15 RSV}. That, we think, is spiritual.

Dr. Brandt says that "sensual" means "pleasurable." The problem we discover when someone tries to help us is that we like to be bitter. It is pleasurable to feel this way toward somebody. We like to be angry and mull things over in our minds, to bear a grudge and nurse a spirit of hatred against someone. We

like it, we do not want to give it up, it is pleasurable. The job of any psychiatrist or psychologist, Christian or otherwise, is simply to help us to see that we are hiding the truth from ourselves, deceiving ourselves. But that is as far as they can go.

Once self-discovery comes, then what? Well, under the old order, a man would take a sacrifice to the priest and the priest would offer it, thus for the moment at least, removing the guilt of the act. Though the problem remained, the guilt from it was removed. That is what the modern priest does. A psychiatrist attempts to dispel guilt by helping his client see his problem in a different light. Or, if he is a Christian psychologist or psychiatrist, to help him to see that God has already forgiven him in Christ and thus to remove guilt. But the basic problem essentially remains, if resolving guilt is all that is done. The psychiatrist may rearrange the problem so it does not grate so strongly upon others, but basically the problem remains. As C. S. Lewis puts it, "No clever arrangement of bad eggs will ever make a good omelet."

Self-discovery is the end of the line as far as the human psychiatrist, counselor, priest, or what-have-you can go. But what lies beyond that? Well, if you do not go any further, eventually, despair! This is what Paul reflects in Romans 7, "O, wretched man that I am! The good that I would do, I do not and the very things that I hate I catch myself doing. O, wretched man that I am. Who can set me free from this body of death?" {cf, Rom 7:24}. Well, that is where this word of Hebrews comes in. There is a Priest who can go further. There is a wisdom, James says, which is from above, to be received as a gift, which is pure, peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, without partiality, without hypocrisy, waiting to be received. "What the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God, sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, judged sin in the flesh, that the righteousness that the law demanded might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit," {cf, Rom 8:3-4}. That which is worthless, weak, and useless, has been set aside and a new hope introduced which brings us near to God.

3. Now return to the text for one more contrast: Not only is the ministry of Jesus superior in greatness to the priesthood of old, and superseding the incompleteness, the temporariness of the Law, but, in his person, he himself surpasses all that any human priest can do.

And it was not without an oath [i.e., the Melchizedek priesthood]. **Those who formerly became priests took their office without an oath, but this one was addressed with an oath, “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, Thou art a priest forever.” This makes Jesus the surety of a better covenant. The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens. {Heb 7:20-26 RSV}**

Note quickly the argument. In the old order the priest never took an oath because the Law was a temporary measure. It was never the ultimate divine intention for the control of men. Never. It was necessary, but it was never the permanent divine intention. But in Christ the permanent program has come, therefore his ministry was confirmed with an oath. God says thereby, “I will never change my mind. You will never be able to find any other program that works. Never. You will not find in all the writings of men, in all the thinking of the world, another way of achieving proper human behavior. I will never change my mind.” Because this is permanent, there is no shut-down!

Further, the old priests inevitably died and the help they offered could therefore suddenly terminate.

A lady said to me some time ago, “I don’t know what I’m going to do. My psychiatrist is moving away and I’m simply lost without him.”

But here is a psychiatrist who never dies, who never moves away, who is never off duty. Therefore, with him there is no breakdown! He can save to the uttermost. Is that not good news? As someone has well put it, “From the guttermost to the uttermost.” No wonder then the writer says in Verse 26, “It is fitting that we should have this kind of a priest.” Very fitting, is it not? He is just made for us in our pressure-filled, hectic, highly mobile, tension-torn days.

Someone has put it in a beautiful acrostic with the name of Jesus: J-E-S-U-S, “Just Exactly Suits Us Sinners.”

Now what is the key that releases this ministry to us? It is written all through Hebrews – faith. Not belief! I did not say belief, we all believe this, but only a few are acting upon it, exercising faith.

The other night at a meeting of our Board of Directors, three men shared together with us their experiences in witnessing. They told of the delight and surprise that was theirs, the joy that was in their heart, as they actually found that people all around them were eager to talk about the things of Christ. After they had finished, two other men spoke up on their own and told about their failures. They confessed that they wanted to do this but they simply had not – could not, they thought! Now, if you had given an examination to all the men of that Board on the doctrine of witnessing, they would have all passed. There was not a man there who did not believe that the Holy Spirit is at work awakening hunger in hearts, that God is able to save, that there are those ready to be talked to, and that there is joy in witnessing. All would have passed. But there were only three who had exercised faith! For faith is a venture, faith is putting your foot out on a principle, faith is attempting it, trying it. Those three men could say that every word they had believed was true.

So, unless we make continual demands upon Christ’s love and power, how else will we ever learn that we can never touch bottom?

Prayer:

We remember, Lord Jesus, how many times you said to your disciples, “O ye of little faith.” We hear these words again in our own hearts, Lord. Grant to us that we

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may have the courage to believe and to step out upon what we believe. Stir us up,

Lord. Grant to us this ability to act on what we know. In Thy name, Amen.

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