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Our Life of Faith

By W. F. BECK

This is the final installment in a series of three studies.

FAITH DOES NOT EARN SALVATION

FAITH is spoken of as passive, a resting on a promise, a floating in the stream. "Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it" (Ps. 81:10; cp. 40:6; 51:15; 119:18). Paul says, "Christ took hold of me" (Phil. 3:12). John: "To all who accepted Him and believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God" (1:12; cp. 17:8; Rom. 5:11, 17; 9:30; Col. 2:6). Jesus told Paul that people "are made holy by believing in Me" (Acts 26:18; Rom. 3:22, 30).

But a man is no statue. He, not God, does the believing. Like the sensory process of seeing or of hearing, believing is active as well as passive. It is not a pressed flower in a book, but a living plant which receives nourishment only to grow and produce fruit. Believing is not only a *Sein*, but also a *Werden*, a dynamic activity, a struggle. Paul tells Timothy, "Fight the good fight of faith" (1 Tim. 6:12; cp. 2 Tim. 4:7).

Faith is an activity which is commanded. Someone has counted forty places where Jesus used the imperative "believe." Paul says to the jailer, "Believe" (Acts 16:31). "This is His commandment [ἐντολή]: We should believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He commanded us" (1 John 3:23). To believe is to obey (Acts 6:7; Rom. 1:5; 6:17; 10:16; 15:18; 16:19, 26; 2 Thess. 3:14). As obedience, faith is an activity of the will. And so Jesus calls faith a work (ἔργον, John 6:29). He says: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord!' will come into the kingdom of heaven—only he who does the will of My Father in heaven" (Matt. 7:21; cp. 12:50; Luke 8:21). Faith is a "turning" from sin to God. "I want the wicked to turn back from his way and live. Come back, come back, from your evil ways. Why will you die, people of Israel?" (Ezek.

33:11.) "A large number believed and turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:21; cp. 26:18,20).

The problem is this: If faith is an action of man, how can we be saved without works when we are saved by faith? Luther emphatically states: Faith is no work; and yet in other places he calls faith a work; and he says faith means to fear, love, and trust in God with all our hearts.

Nevertheless, we are not saved on account of our faith, but only by our faith. Whatever moral value anyone may find in faith, it cannot be counted in our justification.

The Bible makes it very clear that the term "faith" stands in contrast with any supposed good quality in man; it means "without works." "We hold that anyone is made righteous by faith without doing what the Law says" (Rom. 3:28; cp. vv. 20,27). "If instead of working you believe in Him who makes the ungodly righteous, your faith is counted as righteousness" (Rom. 4:5; cp. vv. 13-16; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8-9). "Not having my own righteousness based on the Law, but the righteousness which God gives when I believe in Christ" (Phil. 3:9). Luther: "In order to free myself from the attitude of the Law and of works, I often picture the matter as if there were in my heart no quality which we call faith or love, but in their place I put Christ Himself and say: He is my Righteousness" (*Erl. Ausg.* 58, 359).

Faith is not a work which moves God to save us. The cause of our salvation isn't something that God sees in man. When we pray, "Forgive us our trespasses," our sins are not forgiven because we pray or because we believe. "Our sins are forgiven for His sake" (1 John 2:12). God, who forgives us, is looking at the same object as we do when we believe: There on the Cross is our salvation.

Faith does not give God anything. Nor does it give us anything; it cannot save. "Saving faith" would be a contradiction in terms, like a "nourishing dish," if it were not the metonymy of the container for its content. "Take this cup from Me," Jesus says (Mark 14:36), meaning the bitter drink in the cup.

We do not substitute faith for works. Faith substitutes the

work of Christ for works. Faith justifies, not by its action, but by what it accepts; not by its obedience, but by its object. Eating is necessary to get food, but only food nourishes. Not the hyssop, but the blood wards off the angel of death. It is not my holding Christ or my joy in Him that saves; it is His taking me and cleansing me. Love and forgiveness flow from Jesus; I hold my cup where it flows and receive one gift after another. It is not the shape of my cup or how clean it is that is effective; only what the cup holds quenches my thirst. If I hold a crumpled piece of paper in one hand and a hundred-dollar bill in the other, the holding is the same, but in the one hand I have nothing, in the other I have much. Firmly grasping the scrap of paper will not change it to money. If the content is nothing, my faith may be ever so strong, but it will not help me. Luther says: "Faith does not even justify inasmuch as it is the gift of the Spirit, but only inasmuch as it is related to Christ" (F. Pieper, *Dogmatik*, II, p. 527).

We have a similar problem in the Biblical synonyms of faith: "Come" (Is. 60:6; Matt. 11:28; John 6:44), "flow" (Is. 2:2-3), "run," "seek," "call" (Is. 55:5-6), "thirst," eat," "drink" (Is. 55:1; John 6:53-56; 7:37), "buy" (Is. 55:1), "follow" (John 8:12), "have the heart circumcised" (Rom. 2:29), "put on" (Rom. 13:14; Gal. 3:27). Since πιστεύειν εἰς appears for the first time in the New Testament, the Apostles may have especially coined it; it has been defined as "striving towards," like a ship into harbor, or like an eagle flying to his food. Luther: "Gott will . . . dass man nach seiner Gnade ein inbruenstiges Verlangen tragen soll. Und eben dies tut der Glaube, welcher die Gnade fuer koestlich haelt und deswegen heftig nach derselben hungert und duerstet und sie also verlangt." (Walch, VII, 30.) "Der wahre Glaube umfaengt mit ausgestreckten Armen froehlich den Sohn Gottes" (*loc. cit.*, IV, 379—80). The Apology says: "Fides, quae iustificat . . . est velle"; and "quaerere . . . est vere credere" (*Trigl.*, pp. 134, 162—63). The simplest solution to the problem involved in these terms perhaps is this: Since we find justification and life as an integrated unit, only theoretically separable, one term is used to mean both, just as the term "Christian" means a person who believes in Christ and lives a godly life.

WE SERVE GOD

Faith has two hands, a saving hand which gets salvation from God and a working hand which is active in love. If faith is inactive, it is not faith but sin. "If anyone knows what is right, but does not do it, he is sinning" (James 4:17). "If I can prophesy, know all mysteries, and have all knowledge, *even if I have great faith*, enough to move mountains, but have no love, I am nothing" (1 Cor. 13:2). In Heb. 11:1,3 faith seems to be an intellectual act, but the rest of the chapter makes it mighty in deeds. Faith is alive inasmuch as it clings to Jesus. Good works do not make faith alive, but they prove that faith is alive, because real faith always "is working" (1 Thess. 1:3; 2 Thess. 1:11; James 2:26); it is "active in love" (Gal. 5:6).

Faith is the only channel in which our life pleases God (Heb. 11:6). It makes all the difference in the world. "By faith Abel brought to God a better sacrifice than Cain, for which he was declared righteous. God approved his offerings" (Heb. 11:4).

If we abstract a man's ordinary activities from his antagonism to God and consider them by themselves, many of them seem morally neutral. That is why, if we disregard sin and its forgiveness, much of the life of a converted man seems the same as it was before conversion. But by faith the dominating center, which determines the quality of the whole being, shifts from a sinful self to God. There is a growing re-orientation of the whole person of the believer so that he thinks, speaks, works, and judges differently from other people.

By sin a man is *incurvatus in se*. This egocentricity frustrates the tendencies to serve. When the God of love comes to man, He challenges him to a full and unreserved surrender (Luke 9:57-62). "He died for all that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again" (2 Cor. 5:15). "As people who have risen from the dead and live, give yourselves to God, and let God use the organs of your bodies as tools of righteousness" (Rom. 6:13). When I believe, the self-centered spirit of sin is broken, the lord of self gives up his throne, and the scepter of my soul is put into the hand of Christ, who steps into my world to make it His own. "I was crucified with Christ, and I do not live any more, but Christ lives in me. The life I now

live in my body I live by believing in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." (Gal. 2:19-20.) Now I am a bundle of newly motivated impulses going out in all directions: I confess Him with all my heart, want to do things I have not done before, and lay out new plans of service. You "become altogether new in your mind" (Rom. 12:2). You have a "new self, created to be like God, righteous and holy in the truth" (Eph. 4:24). "We love because He first loved us" (I John 4:19; cp. 3:3). We "love one another heartily and intensely" (1 Peter 1:22).

WE LIVE IN GOD

Natural knowledge is an armed knight who marches over the land, testing his ground and making sure of it at every step, while beside him, just above the ground, moves the white-winged angel of Faith. Side by side they move until the path breaks off short on the verge of a precipice. Knowledge can go no farther since there is no footing for the heavy knight. But the white-winged angel rises majestically from the ground and moves across the chasm.

By faith Israel crossed the Jordan. The Lord had promised Joshua (3:13), "As soon as the soles of the feet of the priests who carry the ark of God, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the water of the Jordan, the water that flows down from above will be cut off and will stand like a wall." The river kept on flowing while the people were in their camp, and there was no lowering of the water level until they stepped into it. The people had to break camp, pack their goods, march to the bank of the river, and step into the stream before anything would happen to the Jordan. If they had stopped anywhere before that, nothing would have happened. They had only the promise, "I will be with you" (3:7). With that they stepped into the Jordan, and it made a path for them. Faith is taking God at His word about things unseen, unknown, untried, and unlikely.

If we want to understand first and then believe, we'll not get far. We need to believe first and then to grow in understanding. As Augustine said, the learned man fumbles to find the latch to the eternal, while the simple and poor have entered into the kingdom of heaven. In this world of sense we are limited to our natural

experiences, and if we try to look beyond them, our natural eyes see only a fog (1 Cor. 2:14). We need the eyes of faith to see the mountains of truth, which, behind the fog, are as real as on a clear day. Here we feel a frail body, but faith can see it glorified.

Faith builds a bridge across the gulf of Death . . .

And lands Thought smoothly on the further shore.—*Young*.

Faith passes by the immediate impressions of life with its evidence of the senses and of logic; it breaks through the crust of our subjective existence and, leaving limitations and transiency behind, comes to the supernatural. It brings with it the problems of life in order to lay them before Him who is enthroned in glory. There, it knows, doubt and fear will cease to plague it when it finds the infallible answers to every human inquiry. By a leap into the beyond it has gained a foothold there where truth is without a condition, ultimately real, a fountain pure and original, from which everything gets its meaning and value.

There we must expect something different from what we have here. Livingstone tried to explain to an African chief just what ice was and how it was formed. The chief told him frankly that he didn't believe his story. He had never seen such water. We may by faith expect new experiences. *Credo quia absurdum* is a caricature, but it does point to the necessity of not letting our narrow human field of vision determine what we will believe. If we transcend our limited sensory capacity, we'll see what no eyes have seen, hear what no ears have heard, discover what no man has thought of, because God has prepared it for those who love Him (Is. 64:4; 1 Cor. 2:9).

Our salvation is beyond our natural experience. By faith we step to the foot of the Cross and to the open grave to receive what no human knowledge can give. We see more than a crucified and risen person. We see—a divine redemption from sin, death, and hell; a forgiveness that is above every ethical conception of our own; a life that is more wonderful than anything we could imagine. It is strange and marvelous that this atonement of Christ should reunite us sinful creatures with our holy Creator; it is a miracle that we should again be loved by Him.

Any human picture of what happened falls short of reality. Our condemnation and justification are court actions; but there is

a difference: The Judge and the accused are personally related. Sin broke an intimate fellowship; separating us from God, our Life, it doomed us to die. Jesus, bringing our pardon, mends the broken bond and brings the lost children back to their home; and by believing we resume our normal relation with God and live again as a happy family of sons and daughters with their Father.

"From now on you know Him and see Him" (John 14:7). If we were to limit our knowledge of God to what our senses can catch of Him, we would pull Him down from heaven into our little world and paint Him with anthropomorphisms or think of Him as a pale abstraction. But to us God is neither a bearded patriarch nor a concept; we know Him as a personal Being, revealed, and transcendent in glory. We cannot penetrate His nature as we would like to, our intelligence and imagination being what they are; but feeling the "pull" from behind the veil, we let God tell us who He is and what His thoughts are (1 Cor. 2:10-13); and we trust Him to give us the truth, like eaglets instinctively finding the right place under their mother's wing. "We live by trusting Him without seeing Him" (2 Cor. 5:7). "You never saw Him, yet you love Him; you do not see Him now, yet you believe in Him, and a joy unspeakable and glorious fills you with delight" (1 Peter 1:8).

We take His promise to be something real, and then God makes it real. "Faith is to believe what we do not see, and the reward of this faith is to see what we believe" (Augustine). God breaks into our earthly life so that we, transfigured by His wonderful love, lay hold of heaven here on earth. "I believe that I will see how good the Lord is in the land of the living" (Ps. 27:13). Jesus said to Martha, "Didn't I tell you, 'If you believe, you will see the glory of God?'" (John 11:40.) "God, who said, 'Let light shine in the dark,' has shone in our hearts to spread the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

Jesus says, "God's bread is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

We say, "Lord, always give us that bread."

He says, "I am the Bread of life" (John 6:33-35).

"In Him was life" (John 1:4; cp. 8:12; Eph. 5:8). "I came that they may have life" (John 10:10; cp. 5:24; Rom. 1:16-17; Heb.

10:39; 1 Peter 1:3, 9; 1 John 5:13). "Do you not know that Jesus Christ is in you?" (2 Cor. 13:5; cp. Eph. 3:17; Col. 2:6.) "You live in God, and God lives in you" (1 John 4:16; Col. 3:3). "He is closer to us than we ourselves" (Augustine). From Him, "the Lord and Giver of life" (Acts 3:15), we have the life of God. "These are born, not of the blood of parents, or of the desire of the body, or of the desire of a man, but of God" (John 1:13; cp. James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23). This life, as of a branch in the vine, goes on when we are unconscious or even when in trouble we doubt that we believe. "Anyone who lives and believes in Me will never die" (John 11:26).

As we live in God, we have what He has, because He shares with us, and we experience His ever-present majesty and power. Jesus said, "Anything can be done if you believe" (Mark 9:23; cp. Matt. 8:13; 15:28). Paul says, "His power . . . is working mightily within me" (Col. 1:29). He "by the power that works in us can do far, far more than anything we ask or imagine" (Eph. 3:20). "Every child of God conquers the world; our faith has triumphed over the world. Who conquers the world but he who believes Jesus is the Son of God!" (1 John 5:4-5.)

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