

Living in Faith

In the name of him in whom we have been made heirs of the heavenly kingdom, dear friends Christ: foremost among the great principles of God's plan of salvation restored to the church at the time of the Reformation is this statement from St. Paul: "*We maintain that a man is justified by faith, apart from the works of the law*". Or to say it another way, the only thing will matter when we stand before God's throne in judgment will be what we believe, not what we have done. For sinners such as ourselves there can be no better comfort than knowing that all our evil thoughts, words, and deeds have been forgiven for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord, and they will not be held against us on the great and terrible Day of the Lord. Our faith will justify us; that is, by our faith we will be declared innocent in God's court of law.

But since *faith* is so very important, this morning I'd like to ask, "What is it exactly?" Here we are relying on faith to determine the difference between spending eternity in heaven or hell; but can we even define what it is? Or how much of it is required? I mean, we all have certain nagging doubts; at times we might even have major fears and uncertainties – does this mean that we don't have faith? Or maybe not enough? Or do we have only to mouth the words, "I believe that Jesus Christ died and rose for me" as if it were some kind of not-so-secret password that will get us in the gates of glory? Is that what faith is? Or is it just knowing and being able to regurgitate the right facts about the life and ministry of Jesus? And if so, which ones do we need to know? Or is faith something more than that?

We live in a culture in which pretty much all knowledge and belief is tied to reason and a procedure called the *scientific method*. It works like this: we make observations about the world around us and then attempt to describe what we see in terms of predictable patterns. When one of these patterns develops, we can make a statement called a hypothesis which can then be tested to see if it's true. Then if it continues to hold true, we reason that the hypothesis is a fact. This scientific approach to understanding the world applies to most everything we know and believe. Medicine, engineering, farming, you name it, it's all based on facts and procedures arrived at by observation and testing, and by applying reason and logic to the results.

A lot of people have the same approach to their religious faith. They want to apply reason and the scientific method to it. So, for example, by looking at the world around us, its detail, its complexity, its wonder and beauty, and so on, they see signs of intelligent design – clear evidence which points to a Creator. And since they logically deduce that there must be a Creator, they think they have faith in him. And so they'll say, "*I believe in God*". And they go through life thinking they have religious faith, because, after all, "*All God wants is for us to believe in him, right?*" Somewhere along the line they've heard "we're saved by faith". And so they reason, "*Since I have faith in God, I must be saved – and so does everyone else who believes in a "God" – whatever they happen to call him, right?*"

Well, sure – *if* that's what faith is—but *it's not*. In today's Epistle reading the writer to the Hebrews tells us: "*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*". And while that's a pretty good translation, it fails to deliver the full impact of the original Greek. What the writer actually says about faith is that it is the *realness* or *substance* of things hoped for and the tangible evidence of things not seen". And that's a fairly radical idea. It's like saying "it's holding in your hand and being able to feel the texture and weight of an object that you hope to receive but that you do not yet have and cannot see"—which you have to admit is kind of weird. And the Biblical idea of *hope* used in this passage is quite a bit different than our modern use of the term. When we say, "I hope so", we mean it's an "iffy" proposal, maybe yes, maybe no. But the word for "hope" used here conveys the concept of certain expectation. You *know* it's going to be. And it's important to understand too that when the writer says that faith is "the conviction of things not seen", he means more than proof of something you cannot see with your eyes. It includes the idea of the inability to see in a mental or cognitive sort of way; like when we use the phrase, "I can't see how" to mean "I don't understand". So, all together, we're being told that faith is holding on to what you do not have and cannot see, but that you are certain you will receive – even though it doesn't make any sense.

This is illustrated for us by the faith of Abraham. In today's reading from Genesis, we find him in a very low moment of his life. It's somewhere around his eighty-fifth birthday, and Abraham doesn't feel that he has very much to celebrate. Ten years earlier, God called him to leave the country of his forefathers and to head out for a land that was going to belong to him and his descendants forever. The Lord promised to make of him a great nation and told him that all the families of the earth would be blessed through him. Abraham believed these promises of the Lord, so he stepped out in faith. He took his wife, Sarah, and all their servants and possessions, and he headed westward not knowing where he was going. But his expectations were high; after all, God had promised him a lot. But when he arrived, things weren't what he expected. Oh, the land seemed nice enough, just as God had said; but it already was full of people: Hittites, Canaanites, and Philistines – and some of them weren't very friendly. Abraham must have wondered how God was going to give him a land that already belonged to someone else. And then on top of it, after being there only a very short time, the land was struck with a severe famine. Some "promised land" it turned out to be – it couldn't even produce enough food to sustain life. Then, later, an invading army led by four kings conquered part of the land and Abraham found himself fighting a war. He might well have wondered what kind of place the Lord had led him to.

And here the Lord had told him that he and his descendants were going to inherit this whole country; but these past ten years Abraham lived in a tent because he didn't even have a small piece of it on which he could build a permanent home – a house like the nice, big, comfortable one he had owned in the land he left behind. But worst of all Abraham still had no children through whom God could fulfill the promise. And at his age, he didn't feel much like he could be a father any more. Even more remote was the possibility that his wife, Sarah, who was now 75, might bear a child. She had never been pregnant and was now well beyond the child bearing years. Between the two of them, at least with respect to the powers of procreation, their bodies were as good as dead. So, by applying reason and the scientific method to his rather sad situation, Abraham figured the only possible way the Lord could keep all those promises he had made was for him, Abraham, to follow an ancient custom that allowed a childless man to adopt his head servant. In Abraham's case it was a fellow named Eliezer. Presumably God planned to fulfill the promises through him. And this disappointed Abraham. To him it was like God's great, grand, glorious promise was one of those statements might be "legally true" but sure looks and feels like a lie. He felt that he had been cheated.

And that's when the Lord came to him and said, "*No, not through this servant of yours, Abram. I'm going to give you a son from your own flesh to be your heir, and from him you will have descendants as numerous as the stars.*" Now, that didn't make a lick of sense to Abraham. He couldn't understand how it might happen. How in the world could God fulfill a promise through his old body which was dead to procreation? But in spite of reason and logic and the scientific method and all the evidence he had, he believed the Words of the Lord. And the Lord looked at Abraham and counted his faith as righteousness. *That* is the kind of faith that justifies. It's the kind of faith that saves.

I've heard people complain to Christians, "*Do you seriously believe in a God who judges people just because of what they believe?*" The question betrays their ignorance about what faith is. They're thinking that faith is simply believing certain facts about God, and since none of these facts can be proven by reason and the scientific method, one belief in God is just as good as any other. But faith is so much more than that. Sure, it starts with certain facts and assertions about God, but it moves far beyond them to trust in his promises that defy reason and logic. The kind of faith that justifies and by which people are saved trusts in what is by our own natural abilities *unbelievable*.

Well, how can you get faith like that? We hear evangelists who pound on their floppy Bibles and/or pulpits and tell people, "You have to believe! You have to have faith!" – as if all you had to do was try real hard in order to have faith. But that's like me shouting into my empty garage "You have to have a brand-new BMW!" There's not much the garage can do about it. I can shout till I'm blue, but the garage is not going to grow a car. Nor could Abraham and Sarah have a child by trying real hard – they'd been proving that for fifty years. And it's the same way with our hearts: they're filled with doubt to begin with, and they have the filter of reason and logic which prevent the entry of any unreasonable ideas. It would take a miracle to have that kind of faith. It would take the creation of something from nothing. And that's the key.

"*By faith we understand that the universe was created by a word of God, so that what is seen was not made of out of things that are visible*". Abraham didn't believe God because he was an exceptionally good

believer or because he was especially gullible. He didn't believe by trying real hard. He believed God because God's Word is itself a creative force. It calls things into existence that weren't there before. When God spoke, his words created faith in Abraham's heart. Faith is a supernatural creation by the power of God through his spoken word. We receive faith the same way Abraham did when we hear God's Word. And so, it should be apparent that apart from God's Word, there can be no faith. People can believe all kinds of things; but if they are not trusting in God's promises, they do not have faith in the biblical sense.

and biblical faith, created by God's power, is itself powerful. We read, "*By faith Sarah received power to conceive because she considered him faithful who had made the promise.*" So faith not only enabled Abraham and Sarah to believe what was too good to be true, it also enabled them to do what was physically impossible for them. Quite literally, Abraham and Sarah's faith brought life – their son Isaac – from death: that is, their inability to have children. And through their son, Isaac, Abraham and Sarah became the parents of a vast nation.

The same is true for us. Our miraculously created faith in God's too-good-to-be-true promises allows us to stand before him alive and blameless even though we are by nature dead in sin. By this faith we believe that the infinite God assumed our finite human form in the person of Jesus Christ. How? We don't know; but we believe it. By this faith we believe that Jesus, God's Son, carried the sins of the whole world to the cross. By this faith we believe that having been baptized into him, his death for sin is our own – and that his resurrection to life is ours as well. By this faith we believe that the Lord is even now bringing life to a vast nation – the people of his Church – from one who was dead. By this faith we believe that he is continuing to strengthen the faith he created in us by feeding us with the body and blood of Jesus given under the forms of bread and wine. And again, we don't ask, "How is it possible?" We simply accept that it is because the Lord himself said so. And by this faith, we believe that we are empowered to live as God's children here on earth while we wait with expectation for the fullness of our promised inheritance to be revealed.

We *live* in this faith, because outside of it there is no life. It's our shelter from death. Faith is the like the tent we live in while we sojourn in this land – just like Abraham and Sarah when they longed for the city with real foundations, whose architect and builder is God. At times our reason and logic look out from this tent of faith on the landscape of world events and our own circumstances and it causes us to wonder how it could possibly come to pass. It doesn't make a lot of sense, and all around us are reasons to doubt and despair. But as we direct our attention to God's unchanging Word and promises, he creates and strengthens in us the faith by which we live – just like he did for Abraham and Sarah, who have already received all they were promised and more. Like they once did, we look forward in faith to inheriting eternally the heavenly kingdom which the Father has been pleased to give us for the sake of his Son. And when that day comes, we, like Abraham and Sarah, will leave behind the tent of faith to receive the full concrete reality of our eternal home – the city that God has prepared for us through Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!