

### ***Living in Faith***

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ: foremost among the great principles of God's plan of salvation restored to the church at the time of the Reformation, and to which we hold fast today, 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 is what we believe, not what we have done. For sinners, there can be no better comfort than knowing that all our evil deeds and thoughts have been forgiven for the sake of Christ, 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.

Okay, since faith is so very important, this morning I'd like to ask, "What is it?" Here we are relying on faith to determine the difference between spending eternity in heaven or hell; can we define what it is? How much of it is required? We all have doubts – does that mean we don't have faith? Or maybe not enough? Do we have only to mouth the words, "I believe Jesus Christ died and rose for me" as if it were some magic password that will get us in the gates of glory? Is that what faith is? Is it just knowing the right facts? If so, which ones do we need to know? Or, is faith something more than that?

We live in a culture in which 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 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. For example, by looking at the world around them: its detail, its signs of intelligent design, its wonderful beauty; they see evidence which points to a Creator. And since they reason there must be a Creator, they think they have faith in him; and so they'll say, "*I believe in God*", and 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"; so, "*since I have faith in God I must be saved – and so does everyone else who believes in God – whatever they happen to call him, right?*"

Well, sure – if that's what faith is ... **but it's not**. The writer to the Hebrews tells us: "*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*". "The **assurance** of things **hoped for**"; that's a fairly radical idea. It's like saying "it's holding on to what you do not yet have." And the Biblical idea of *hope* is quite a bit different than our modern use of the term. When we say, "I hope so", we mean it's an "iffy" possibility, maybe yes, maybe no – but it's what I *want* to happen. The Greek word for "hope" used in this passage conveys the concept of *certain* expectation. You *know* it's going to be. And to say the "conviction of things not seen" means more than proof of something you cannot see with your eyes. It includes the idea of the inability to see in a *cognitive* way. Like when we use the phrase, "I can't see how"

to say, "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 by the faith of Abraham. In today's reading from Genesis, we find him in a low moment. It's somewhere around his eighty-fifth birthday, and Abraham doesn't feel he has very much to celebrate. Ten years earlier, God called him to leave the country of his forefathers and head out for a land that was going to belong to him and his descendants forever. God had told him that he was going to make of him a great nation, and that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him. So he obeyed: took his wife, Sarah, and their servants and possessions and headed west. Expectations were high, after all, God had promised a lot. But when they arrived, things weren't what they expected. The land was nice enough, but it was full of people already: 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 couldn't even produce enough food to sustain its population. 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 a place the Lord had led him to.

And here the Lord had told him he was going to inherit the whole country; but all this time Abraham lived in a tent because he didn't even have just a small piece of property on which he could build a permanent house – like the nice one he had left behind. But worst of all, he still had no children through which God could fulfill the promise. At his age, he didn't feel much like he could be a father; and now at 75, Sarah, who had never been pregnant, was well beyond the child bearing years. Between the two of them, with respect to the powers of procreation, their bodies were dead. Applying reason and the scientific method to his situation, Abraham figured the only way God could keep the promise to him was for him to follow an ancient custom that allowed a childless man to adopt his head servant. Presumably, he could leave everything to this servant, and God would fulfill the promise through him. Abraham was disappointed. To him it all sounded like God's great promise was one of those statements might be "legally true", but sure looked and felt like a lie. He felt like he'd been cheated.

That's when God came to him and told him, "*No, not through your servant, 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 that might happen. How in the world could God fulfill a promise through a body which was dead to procreation? But in spite of reason and the scientific method, he believed 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 of what faith is. They're thinking faith is simply the belief in certain facts about God, and since none of these facts can be proven by reason and the scientific method, one belief is just as good as any other. But faith is so much more than that. Sure, it starts with certain facts, but it moves beyond them to trust in promises that defy reason and logic. The faith that justifies is the kind of faith that trusts in what is *unbelievable* by our natural abilities.

Well, where can you get faith like that? We hear evangelists who pound on pulpits and tell people, “You have to believe! You have to have faith!” – as if all you had to do was try real hard, and you too could have that faith. But that’s like someone shouting into an empty garage “You have to have a Mercedes!” There’s not much the garage can do about it. Shout all you like, your 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 over forty years. 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.

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 promised.”* 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 him. Quite literally, Abraham and Sarah’s faith brought life – their son Isaac – from death: that is, their inability to have children. And through Isaac, Abraham and Sarah became the parents of a vast nation.

And the same is true for us. Our miraculous 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 faith we believe that the infinite God assumed our finite human form in the person of Jesus Christ. By faith we believe that Jesus carried the sin of the whole world to the cross. By faith we believe that his death is our own – and that his resurrection to life is ours as well. By faith we believe that once again, God brought life to a vast nation from one who was dead. 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 God’s glorious inheritance to be revealed.

We **live** in this faith, because outside of it there is no life. It’s a shelter from death. It’s the like the tent we live in as we sojourn in the land of promise – just like Abraham and Sarah, while they longed for the city with real foundations, whose architect and builder is God. Our reason and logic look out from this tent on the landscape of world circumstances and wonder how it will come to pass. All around are reasons to doubt and despair. But as we direct our attention to God’s promises, he creates and strengthens in us the faith by which he gives us life – like he did for Abraham and Sarah, who have already received all they were promised and more. Like them, we look forward inheriting that heavenly kingdom forever which the Father has been pleased to give us for the sake of his Son. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***