

# THE PATH TO LIVING FAITH

***Without faith it is utterly impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). Yet Jesus asked: "... When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8.) The terrifying implications of that question should give pause to any true Christian! What is this faith that God seeks in His people? How is it attained? Is it even possible to have living faith in an age of skepticism, criticism and doubt?***

by Brian Knowles

**F**aith is a cop-out—a device used by those who are unwilling to face the facts and to acknowledge the bitter truth," claim the critics of conventional Christianity. In many instances this criticism is entirely justified!

Professing Christians have often resorted to "faith" (falsely so-called) when they are unable to resolve some theological difficulty. "I just believe it because my church teaches it, that's all—I don't *have* to understand it," is the thinking.

This type of faith is rightly subject to ridicule and criticism. This indeed is "blind faith." This is *not* the kind of faith which God seeks in His children!

Peter told the churches: "... Be ready always to *give an answer* to every man that asketh you a *reason* of the hope that is in you..." (I Peter 3:15).

**Faith Must Be Built.** The faith of a true Christian is not blind. It is based on *reason*. It is founded on firm *evidence*. It is established on the bedrock of *conviction*!

True faith is not suddenly acquired at baptism. Rather, it is something that is *built* over a period of time. It is a product, result of experience, study and testing. It is produced by the continual working of God's Holy Spirit in the life of an individual Christian. Paul lists faith as one of the "fruits of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:22.

There is no such thing as "instant faith." True, enduring, believing faith is not suddenly acquired. It is primarily the result of experience. The apostle Peter provides us with an excellent illustration of this point.

Before Peter was converted and granted the gift of the Holy Spirit, he had nothing more than a certain human confidence. He was impetuous and cocksure. But he did *not* have abiding, *living* faith.

The well-known account of Jesus walking on the water provides an interesting insight into this fact. Immediately after Jesus had performed one of the most notable miracles of His public ministry—the feeding of more than five thousand with five loaves and two fishes—He instructed His disciples to take a small boat back to Capernaum across the Sea of Galilee (Matt. 14:15-22). Jesus Himself sought a little privacy, during which time He prayed (verse 23).

While He was praying, evening came and a strong wind arose on the lake (verse 24). All night long the tiny ship was buffeted about by the wind and the waves. They were unable to make it to shore. Perhaps the mast had snapped. Possibly the vessel's rudder had been lost. The disciples cowered in fear as the storm continued to buffet the small craft. Finally, somewhere between 3 and 6 a.m. (the 4th watch—verse 25), Jesus

came to His beleaguered disciples, walking on the water!

At first, the disciples thought they were seeing a spirit of some type. After all, Jesus was a physical human being at that time. Walking on water was simply not done every day by your average Galilean. Their reaction was entirely natural.

As soon as Jesus identified Himself, Peter reacted with typical impetuosity. He said: "Lord, if it be thou [apparently he still was not convinced], bid *me* come unto thee on the water" (verse 28).

Peter was acting presumptuously. His confidence was momentary and artificial. He had not thought the situation through. He wasn't even entirely sure, at that moment, if he was talking to Jesus Christ. Yet he reacted—he literally "stepped out on faith."

"And he [Christ] said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus" (verse 29).

But Peter's "faith" was insufficient to sustain him. When he began to realize the logical absurdity of the situation, his confidence and his body began to sink simultaneously! "... When he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me" (verse 30). The momentary force of Peter's quickly acquired faith immediately dissipated in the face of stark reality!

Jesus turned the situation into an object lesson in living faith. "And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, *O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?*" (Verse 31.)

Let's analyze the situation. The skeptic will argue that Peter had *no reason* to have faith that he would be able to walk on water. After all, doing so defies the laws of physics. Science tells us that the only kind of water a person can walk on is frozen water—ice.

Must we then conclude that Jesus was unreasonable in expecting Peter to have faith under these circumstances?

Not at all.

Peter had *powerful evidence* upon which to base his faith! He had the evidence right before his eyes—Jesus was doing it! That's what gave him the initial impetus to step out of the boat.

In addition, Peter had seen strong evidence of the power of God the previous day in the miracle of the loaves and the fishes. If God could provide up to ten thousand people with food from five loaves and two fishes—could He not also provide a little buoyancy on a stormy lake?

Yet there are reasons why Peter's faith failed.

**Why Peter's Faith Failed.** For one thing, he began to look at the physical circumstances. He focused on the howling wind, the turbulent waves and the flying spindrift. He took his mind off Jesus Christ and *His faith!* In his mind, Peter replaces superior evidence with inferior. The simple fact that Jesus Himself was *defying* the laws of nature in walking on the water should have told him that it could indeed, be done! He was actively witnessing it.

Yet Peter chose to ignore this conclusive evidence and instead focused his attention on the circumstances with which he was more familiar.

Secondly, Peter lacked *experience*.

Experience produces confidence. It sets up a pattern of precedents upon which a person can build. The more one has experienced the miracle-working power of God, the more he begins to take it for

granted—the more faith and confidence is built.

Faith must become intrinsic. It must be enduring and abiding—an indelible part of one's spiritual personality. The exercising of faith in a given situation must ultimately become second nature to a Christian.

But this takes time and experience. Each experience provides a stepping stone for the next. Jesus provided His disciples (students) with many such experiences during the three-and-one-half years of His earthly ministry. Each of these was added to the reservoir of experience upon which the disciples drew throughout their entire ministry.

By the time the Church was established and underway, Peter had *grown* enormously in dynamic, living faith! Notice this account in the book of Acts: "Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour [3 p.m.]. And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at that gate of the temple which is called Beautiful to ask alms of those who entered the temple. Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked for alms. And Peter directed his gaze at him, with John, and said, 'Look at us.' And he fixed his attention upon them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, 'I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, *walk*.' And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong" (Acts 3:1-7, RSV).

This was not the same Peter who had faltered in faith on the stormy Sea of Galilee. Here was a man charged with confidence in Jesus Christ and in the power of God. What Peter *now* had (cf. verse 6) was living, dynamic, instantly available *faith!* He now looked to the *right kind* of evidence—the power of Jesus Christ and the Spirit of God! His faith had been *built* upon years of experience. Now that faith was *intrinsic!*

**Levels of Faith.** The level of Peter's faith had risen to such a degree that even his passing by resulted in incredible healings (Acts 5:15-16). The Holy Spirit had been working

with him producing a backlog of faith- and confidence-building experiences. Now the exercise of faith was second nature to the apostle. He *walked* and lived in *faith*. His experiences had produced confident hope and assurance. As Paul later wrote: "... Tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, *hope*" (Rom. 5:3-4).

Christ desires that all Christians achieve this level of faith. We are told no less than four separate times in Scripture: "The just shall *live* by his faith" (cf. Hab. 2:4; Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38). As Paul told the church at Corinth: "For we walk by faith, *not by sight*" (II Cor. 5:7). Before conversion, like Peter, we did exactly the opposite—we walked by *sight*, not by faith.

In the walking on water incident, Peter had allowed what he *saw* to overrule what he *knew*. The Christian does the opposite. His faith is based on the firm evidence of what he *knows* to be the will of God.

Peter *sank* by sight—but Jesus had *walked* on the water by faith!

Sometimes what we *see* erodes our confidence. It is especially difficult to exercise faith in our modern, technological society. It is difficult to even feel close to God in a world which denies Him at every turn.

The Bible itself has been so examined, criticized, evaluated, analyzed, critiqued and torn apart that it is hard to even know which parts of it are trustworthy! How can we be certain of the will of God in any given circumstance unless we have some reliable revelation?

**Faith in God and the Bible.** The apostle Paul wrote: "*All scripture* is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (II Tim. 3:16, 17).

If you can believe that statement then you should have no difficulty knowing what the will of God is in terms of exercising faith!

Paul also wrote: "But without faith it is impossible to please him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Heb. 11:6).

Here, belief in God is intrinsically tied up with the matter of faith. Those who wish to walk by faith must have a sense of the *reality* of God—they must be actively conscious of His existence. Furthermore, they must believe that He is capable and willing to respond to the needs of those who diligently seek such intervention. As David said: “*Thou art near, O Lord . . .*” (Ps. 119:151). And again in Psalm 145:18: “*The Lord is near to all who call upon him, to all who call upon him in truth*” (RSV). God is as close as your next sincere, believing prayer!

David also said: “He fulfils the desire of all who fear him, he also hears their cry, and saves them” (Ps. 145:19, RSV).

God is not deaf. Because of His compassionate nature He cannot help but respond to the prayers of those who truly believe, in faith, that He hears them.

But a faithful person is not unsure of himself. He does not waver in faith, but is sure that God is there and that He hears our prayers. James made this clear when he was discussing the matter of asking God for wisdom.

“But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways, will receive anything of the Lord” (James 1:6-8, RSV).

Faith and doubt are antonyms to God!

**Abraham’s Example.** Abraham did not doubt that God would fulfill His promise to make him the father of many nations—even though what he *saw*, the physical evidence, told him otherwise. Abraham and his wife Sarah were long past the age when couples have children. Sarah even laughed at the whole idea that they would have a son in their old age (Gen. 18:12). But “. . . Abraham *believed* God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (Rom. 4:3). Abraham had simple confidence that God would indeed perform what He had promised to do. He had hope even when the physical circumstances told him he should have none (verse 18). Abraham’s

concept of faith is summed up in verses 19-21 of this same chapter:

“And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body [he did not walk by sight!] now dead [i.e., impotent], when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah’s womb: He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; *and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform.*”

Here is the simple definition of Abraham’s faith. He is the father of the faithful (cf. Rom. 4:11, 16). Abraham is our prime example of faith—next to Jesus Christ Himself!

Faith is therefore predicated upon knowing the will of God. When we recognize His promises and claim them in confidence, we are exercising faith. *The greatest evidence available is the fact that God has promised something.* This is the *basis* for faith. This information overshadows the physical evidence in many cases. Yet, this is not blind, unknowing faith. It is based upon a clear understanding of the will of the *living* God.

**Misguided, Misdirected Faith.** Unfortunately, many well-meaning Christians have inadvertently created a source of ridicule by sometimes misunderstanding what is meant by faith.

Perhaps a prime example is found in the snake-handling sects of the southern United States. These zealous, but often misguided, people believe that the voluntary handling of poisonous reptiles is a demonstration of faith. After all, God has made certain promises in this regard in the Bible: “These signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils [demons]; they shall speak with new tongues; *they shall take up serpents*; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them . . .” (Mark 16:17-18).

The apostle Paul, on one occasion, accidentally took hold of a poisonous serpent on the island of Malta. “Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, when a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. . . . He, however, shook off the

creature into the fire and suffered no harm” (Acts 28:3, 5, RSV).

These examples are often used to justify the handling of rattlesnakes, copperheads, water moccasins and other deadly reptiles.

This is an example of misguided faith based on an inaccurate understanding of God’s will. Jesus was not talking about *voluntarily* picking up poisonous creatures in order to “show off” one’s faith. Rather, He was referring to just such an instance as Paul encountered—an *accidental* situation.

We can understand this important truth from Jesus’ own example. **Christ’s Personal Example.** At the beginning of his 3½-year ministry, Jesus was put through one of the most severe trials of His entire life—next to the crucifixion itself. He was severely tempted directly and personally by the “god of this world” (II Cor. 4:4)—the devil. Jesus defeated the devil *because He knew the will of God*. Satan quoted Scripture to Jesus—accurately. But the devil misused those scriptures. He misapplied them.

“Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple. And saith unto him, *If thou be the Son of God [an appeal to Christ’s nonexistent vanity!], cast thyself down*: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone” (Matt. 4:5, 6). If you will check Psalm 91:11-12 you will find that the devil quoted the scripture quite accurately! He did not twist it. It was indeed a promise of God!

But the devil *misused* that scripture. He did not place it alongside those other scriptures which *qualified* its meaning and intent! Jesus was familiar with the *entire* Bible—after all, it was He who inspired it through the Holy Spirit in the first place (John 1:1-5). He knew that God did not intend that people should go around taking unnecessary risks or acting in a foolhardy manner simply because God had promised protection!

Rather than take the bait that Satan was offering, Jesus wisely quoted another scripture to him—a scripture which qualified the one the

devil had cited: "Jesus said unto him, It is written again, *Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God*" (Matt. 4:7; Deut. 6:16).

To cast Himself off the edge of the Temple wall would have been tempting God. It would have been taking an unnecessary risk—tempting fate. It would not have been a demonstration of courage to do so—it would have been foolish!

This is also the case with "snake handling." A number of well-meaning, but misguided, people have died as a result of "tempting God" in this manner.

God does promise protection from accidental situations that may occur inadvertently. But He does not expect Christians to take unnecessary risks in anything. To do so is to tempt God! It is not faith or courage—but foolishness!

Faith must be based on *understanding* and *knowledge*.

**Faith Toward God.** It is also critically important to understand in what direction faith is to be exercised. Some

have mistakenly placed their faith in "faith healers" and sideshow evangelists who seek to create a personal following. But *no man* can heal! God alone is able to heal the sick and raise the dead. Placing faith in men is a mistake: "Thus saith the Lord; *Cursed be the man that trusteth in man*, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord" (Jer. 17:5).

By contrast, Jeremiah says: "Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is" (verse 7).

Faith is toward God—and God *alone!*

This does not mean that man cannot help—in the matter of healing, for example. As Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong has said on occasion: "God does for us what we *cannot* do for ourselves."

The medical profession *is* able to help those who are sick or injured. Luke, the writer of the Gospel by that name and the book of Acts, was called "the beloved physician" (Col. 4:14).

He is not called the "beloved *ex*-physician"! He traveled with Paul on his various journeys. Yet Paul himself was used of God as an instrument of healing on numerous occasions. Not that Paul ever healed anyone. He did not. God alone can heal—but He used Paul as a vehicle through which He performed miracles of healing (cf. Acts 14:8-10; 19:11-12; 20:9-10; 28:8-9).

As Jeremiah also wrote: "Heal me, O Lord, and I *shall* be healed; save me, and I shall be saved: for thou art my praise" (Jer. 17:14).

The Christian must understand the correct role of each factor in the questions of faith and healing. It is largely a matter of understanding and balance. Any one scripture

must be understood in the light of those other scriptures which apply to the situation.

**Faith as a Way of Life.** Faith does not apply only to healing. Faith is—or should be—a way of life. As quoted earlier, we *walk by faith*. It should be a daily, ever-present factor in every Christian life.

Faith may be applied to physical protection, healing, finances, job-hunting or job-retaining! Faith pertains to solving of marital problems or other difficulties in human relations. Faith is the key factor in claiming *any* promise of God! (See Romans 4:20, 21.)

It is faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and in His resurrection that gives the Christian hope for the future. As Paul wrote: "If *in this life only* we have hope [faith] in Christ, we are of all men most miserable!" (I Cor. 15:19.)

Faith in the glorious future promised by God to His children is the driving force in the life of every truly converted child of God. It is the motivating factor—the element that gives the Christian the confidence to face the trials of being a Christian in a godless society of skepticism and doubt.

Walk, not in the blind faith of ignorant men, but in the knowledgeable, understanding faith of the children of God! □

#### RECOMMENDED READING

The disciples said to Jesus: "Increase our faith." Millions today lack the faith to receive answers to their prayers—to free their minds from fears and worries. To a large extent this is due to a lack of a thorough understanding of what faith is. The Worldwide Church of God publishes an attractively printed booklet entitled *What Is Faith?* This free publication is designed to increase your faith. Write for your free copy.

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