

The Work of Faith

*“We pray always
for you, that our
God would count
you worthy of this
calling, and fulfil
all the good
pleasure of his
goodness, and the
work of faith
with power.”*

—II Thessalonians

1:11

THROUGHOUT THE CEN-turies there have been differences of opinion as to the relative value of faith and works in the lives of those endeavoring to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. According to the testimony of the Scriptures, however, neither of these segments of the Christian life can exist without the other. In our opening text, the Apostle Paul speaks of “the work of faith,” repeating words he had written in his first letter to the Thessalonian brethren. (I Thess. 1:3) It is evident from his words that Paul believed and taught that a living faith in God and his Word will manifest itself in works, and additionally, that all acceptable Christian works must be the outgrowth of faith.

We are accustomed to think of Abraham as a man of outstanding faith, yet the reason we know he had faith is because he demonstrated it by his works. James wrote, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he brought up Isaac his son to

the altar? Thou seest that . . . faith cooperated with his works; and that . . . faith was made complete by the works; and that scripture was verified, which says, And Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness; and he was called a Friend of God. You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.”—James 2:21-24, *Wilson’s Emphatic Diaglott*

Paul also observed the faith life of Abraham, stating, “By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.” (Heb. 11:8) Here the work which demonstrated Abraham’s faith was his obedience in leaving his own country and home, and starting out for a place unknown. A brief way of explaining Abraham’s work of faith is that he obeyed. When we consider all that was involved, however, we can well understand why the Lord was so pleased with him. How many of us would leave home, family and friends, and start out on a mission to unknown parts, with the only assurance being that God would show us where to go and what he wanted done?

MOSES’ FAITH

Paul also said, “By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the

king: for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible.”—Heb. 11:24-27

Moses’ work of faith was his forsaking the riches of Egypt and the high position which he held there, and casting in his lot with his fellow Israelites, who were then in disfavor with Pharaoh. Moses did this at the risk of his life, and as a result had to flee from Egypt. He went to the land of Midian, where he was separated from his people for forty years.

Moses did not forget his brethren, nor did he forget God, who had made such wonderful promises to his father Abraham. When God appeared to him at the burning bush, Moses gave attention to the instructions given to him. His years of exile had an effect on Moses. He was now no longer so sure of himself as when he rose up and slew an Egyptian forty years earlier because he was persecuting one of his brethren.—Exod. 2:11-15; 3:1-10; Acts 7:22-34

This was a good thing, however, for the Lord cannot use those who think they are capable in their own wisdom and strength. Indeed, an important work of faith is to realize one’s own insufficiency, and the need to rely on God for grace and assistance in every experience of life. In Moses’ case, he at first hesitated, asking, “Who am I,” to undertake the deliverance of the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt? He also asserted that he was not “eloquent,” but “slow of speech,” and unsuitable to approach Pharaoh and ask for the release of his brethren.—Exod. 3:11; 4:10

God promised Moses that he would provide all his needs, even to assigning his brother Aaron as his mouthpiece. (chap. 4:14-16) With these assurances, Moses obeyed the Lord’s call to this difficult

task, and for forty years applied himself diligently, not only delivering the Israelites from Egypt, but bringing them to the very border of the Promised Land. Perhaps no one has rendered service in the divine cause that was more challenging than the work of faith carried out by Moses during the final forty years of his life.

FURTHER WORKS OF FAITH

Beginning with Hebrews 11:32, Paul presents to us a list of many who in ages past proved their faith by their works. He tells of “Gedeon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets: Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again.”—vss. 32-35

It should be noted that in this list of those who demonstrated their faith by their works, the Lord visibly rewarded those who thus proved their faithfulness. Gideon was successful in battle against the Midianites, even though by God’s direction his army was reduced to a mere three hundred. Barak, another judge in Israel, was successful in battle, by the Lord’s help. Samson was given strength to accomplish what God wanted him to do. Jephthae, another of Israel’s judges, had his efforts crowned with success.

Likewise, David demonstrated his faith by his works. How wonderfully the Lord blessed him, beginning with his early experience of contending

with the giant, Goliath, and destroying him. Samuel, the last of Israel's judges, surely was faced with many difficult tasks, but through faith he met these challenges, and how wonderfully God blessed his long life of service.

Guided by the power of the Lord, some of the works by which these, Paul says, demonstrated their faith were the conquering of kingdoms, laboring in righteousness, obtaining promises, and stopping the mouths of lions. This last statement is a reference to Daniel, who continued praying to God daily, as was his custom, although the king had decreed that anyone who prayed other than through him should be cast into a den of lions. Daniel knew what the cost of loyalty to his God would be, but he persisted in performing his work of faith, and was cast into a den of lions. The Lord sent an angel and delivered him, but Daniel did not know in advance that this would be the case.—Dan. 6:1-22

The expression, "quenched the violence of fire," is a reference to the three young Hebrews who defied the edict of the Babylonian king, and did not worship the great image which he had set up. In doing this they did not know what the outcome would be so far as their own personal experience was concerned. They said to the king, "If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up." Here the work of faith was the refusal to worship an image of a heathen king, even though threatened with death for not doing so. God

rewarded the faith of the three Hebrews by miraculously delivering them from the fiery furnace.—Dan. 3:16-27

Others, Paul says, escaped death by the sword, were strengthened even though previously weak, became courageous in battle, and turned away armies of enemy nations. In some cases, the dead were even raised to life again. We may not be able to identify all the individuals here mentioned, but the language indicates that the Lord visibly blessed each of them as a reward for their work of faith.

“OTHERS” PERMITTED TO SUFFER

“Others,” Paul continues, “had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment.” (Heb. 11:36) This list continues through verse 38, and all who are mentioned were permitted to suffer. Unlike Daniel and the three Hebrews, God did not deliver these. Nevertheless, they were loyal to him, and faithfully performed the work which came to them, even though it cost them much suffering, and finally death. One of the important lessons brought to us by the experiences of all the heroes of faith cited by Paul in Hebrews 11 is that a true work of faith will have as its motive the doing of God’s will, regardless of what the cost might be.

None of the Lord’s people can know in advance what experiences they may be called upon to go through on account of their faithfulness to the will and work of God. A victorious faith will say that this does not make any difference—that it is our privilege to trust and obey, regardless of the present outcome of any experience. (Prov. 3:5,6; Rom. 8:28)

If this be the case, we will find that some of our days may be outwardly blessed, and others will include distress and suffering. Humble acceptance of such experiences, however, will brighten our days and make them “sweet with accepted pain,” as expressed by the poet.

OUR PRESENT WORK OF FAITH

The work of God in the earth during the present Gospel Age has been the selection and development of those who are to be associated with Jesus in the kingdom as his “bride.” (II Cor. 11:2; Rev. 19:7; 21:9) Our preparation to be this future bride of Christ has called for the proclaiming of the Gospel, and the laying down of our lives in the Lord’s service. These labors of faith began at Pentecost, but prior to this Jesus laid the foundation for this work by his own faithfulness in preaching the Gospel of the kingdom, and by illustrating what its blessings will mean to the people by the many miracles which he performed.

As Jesus associated with the sin-cursed and dying people of his day, it required a strong faith to believe the promises of his Heavenly Father that the blessings of the coming Messianic kingdom would reach mankind and restore them to perfection of mind and body. Jesus had this faith, however, and it enabled him to go forth day after day and preach the Gospel of the kingdom. This work of faith was costly for the Master, not only in terms of weariness, but also because it brought upon him the enmity of the religious rulers of his day. They questioned, ridiculed, tempted, and persecuted him—finally even unto death.

Satanic darkness has always hated the light which emanates from God through his Word and his people. (John 3:19,20) In Jesus' day, the opinions and traditions of men occupied the chief position of influence in the minds and hearts of those who opposed him. It has also been so throughout the age. Many professing to serve the cause of Christ have been greatly angered when others indicate that much of their theories does not harmonize with the teachings of the Bible. Such has been the case—in Jesus' day, throughout the Gospel period and now in the end of the age.

JESUS' FAITHFULNESS

At the close of Jesus' ministry, he was arrested and brought before Caiaphas, the high priest. He asked Jesus about his disciples, and his doctrine. "Jesus answered him, I spake openly to the world; I ever taught in the synagogue, and in the temple, whither the Jews always resort; and in secret have I said nothing. Why askest thou me? ask them which heard me, what I have said unto them: behold, they know what I said."—John 18:19-21

How tirelessly Jesus performed his work of faith! In most of the places where he ministered he encountered opposition. He no doubt was often weary, as when he said to his disciples, "Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while: for there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat. And they departed into a desert place by ship privately."—Mark 6:31,32

Jesus, however, did not get his much needed rest. A crowd followed him to the "desert place" by making the journey around the lake while watching

the ship off shore, and learning thus where it landed. The crowd was on hand when Jesus arrived. Did he send these people away with the explanation that he had come there to rest and did not want to be bothered? The record clearly states otherwise, that when Jesus came out of the ship, he “saw much people, and was moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd: and he began to teach them many things.”—Mark 6:33,34

Although Jesus was weary, he did not allow this to deter him from the use of this wonderful opportunity to preach the Gospel. Here was another example of how costly the work of faith can be at times. The record does not state how long Jesus preached to this multitude, but says, “When the day was now far spent, his disciples came unto him, and said, This is a desert place, and now the time is far passed: Send them away, that they may go into the country round about, and into the villages, and buy themselves bread: for they have nothing to eat.”—vss. 35,36

Tired though he was, Jesus did not agree to this suggestion of sending the multitude away. Instead, he had his disciples gather the small supply of food they had on hand, and by a miracle—another work of faith—he increased a few loaves and fishes sufficiently to feed the multitude, which numbered about five thousand. Jesus personally handed the food to his disciples for them to serve the people. (vss. 37-44) Jesus loved the multitude, although he probably realized that most of them would not accept the true Gospel of salvation until the time of his future kingdom, after they had been raised from the dead. Yet, his faith and love prompted him to serve them

with the Truth, and with material food, which likely consumed a large part of the time he had set aside for rest.

WORKS AFTER PENTECOST

The labor and ministry of Jesus were preparatory to the work of the Gospel Age, which began at Pentecost. On the Day of Pentecost, upon receiving God's Holy Spirit and the resulting gift of speaking in foreign languages, we find Peter at first refuting charges that the disciples were intoxicated. He then delivered that wonderful sermon showing that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and had sent the Holy Spirit as he had promised to do before his crucifixion. (Acts 2) Here was an outstanding work of faith, manifested in Peter, which helped to establish the Early Church, but which also continued the opposition of the religious rulers against Jesus and his apostles.

It was shortly after Pentecost that Peter and John were used by the Lord to heal a man who had been unable to walk from the time of his birth. (Acts 3) Peter climaxed his explanation of this miracle by his lesson concerning the "times of restitution," which would follow Jesus' coming at his Second Advent. (vss. 20-25) It was a wonderful sermon, and truly a work of faith. Beginning with Acts 4, we read, "As they spake unto the people, the priests, and the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees, came upon them, Being grieved that they taught the people, and preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands on them, and put them in hold unto the next day: for it was now eventide."—vss. 1-3

Despite these circumstances, the people as a whole who had heard Peter's message, and knew of the miracle which had prompted it, were favorably impressed. The religious rulers decided it would not be wise to hold the apostles in prison, so the next morning they were released. After holding a council in their absence, the rulers called the apostles and asked, "By what power, or by what name, have ye done this?"—speaking of the miracle that had been performed.—Acts 4:4-7

"Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said unto them, Ye rulers of the people, and elders of Israel, If we this day be examined of the good deed done to the impotent man, by what means he is made whole; Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by him doth this man stand here before you whole. This [Jesus] is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner. Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved."—vss. 8-12

When these rulers saw "the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus." (vs. 13) Jesus had been bold in his work of faith, and Peter and John had observed this. Now that they were his footstep followers, by the power of the Holy Spirit they also displayed this same determination to carry on in the same work of faith, no matter what the cost might be.

THE APOSTLES' DETERMINATION

The religious rulers talked the matter over further and decided that they would give the apostles their freedom, simply commanding them not to speak any more in the name of Jesus. To this, Peter and John answered, "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." (vss. 15-20) So far as Peter and John were concerned, there could be no compromise. They would permit nothing to deter them from their work of faith.

Released, they returned to "their own company" and reported their experience. When the brethren heard it, they raised their voices to God in one accord, saying, "Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is: Who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done. And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, By stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of . . . Jesus. And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy

Spirit, and they spake the word of God with boldness.”—Acts 4:24-31

THE FAITHFUL THESSALONIANS

We see similar examples of zeal and boldness in the life and ministry of all the apostles, as well as many others in the Early Church. In I Thessalonians 1:3, the Apostle Paul mentions the work of faith being performed by these brethren, and commends them for it. He then enlarges upon what he means: “Ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit: So that ye were ensamples to all that believe. . . . For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing.”—vss. 6-8

What a compliment this is to the brethren at Thessalonica for their zeal in the work of faith—the work of proclaiming the Gospel, and of sounding forth the Word of God! They had covered that area so thoroughly that Paul found that there was really no need for him to remain, and he could shift his focus to another region.

Paul explains that it was the fervent enthusiasm of these dear ones at Thessalonica that demonstrated their faith to God. It was indeed their work of faith. May we today, as the year 2016 comes to a close and as 2017 begins, resolve to continue zealous in this same work of faith to the fullest extent that the Lord gives us strength and opportunity! ■