The Substance of Things Hoped For

"Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."
—Hebrews 11:1

FAITH IS THE ABILITY TO believe as true that which cannot be demonstrated by our natural, physical senses. We cannot see God nor hear his voice, nor touch him. Thus it takes faith to believe in his existence. The Apostle Paul emphasizes the importance of having this special quality of faith, and that God is pleased with those who exercise it. In this same chapter on faith he explains, "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

This is faith in its simplest form. But true Christian faith goes beyond this. We not only believe that God exists, but we have faith in God, and in his integrity, justice, love, wisdom, and power. We have faith in the rightness of the Divine plan as it pertains to ourselves individually, and to his people collectively. We also have faith in the Divine plan for the world in general. This is the minimum of

faith which one must possess in order to approach God and receive blessings from him.

Abraham was richly rewarded for his faith. We read in Genesis 15:6, "He believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness." Paul quotes this in Romans 4:3, and in the twenty-second verse adds, "It was imputed to him for righteousness." Clearly, it was imputed to him. Abraham, like all other members of the fallen and condemned race, was imperfect. It was impossible for him to live up to the Divine standard of righteousness, yet he had strong faith in God and in the promises of God. God was willing to—and did—'count,' or consider, Abraham's faith as an evidence of his integrity. He knew that Abraham would serve him perfectly if he could.

Because of Abraham's faith, God accepted him as a friend. Here was a genuine basis for friendship. Abraham believed God and, because he did, God had confidence in him. Thus a beautiful friendship was established and maintained which continued throughout Abraham's lifetime. On various occasions, God spoke to Abraham, reiterating and enlarging upon the promise he made to him on the "plains of Mamre," that through his seed he would bless all the families of the earth.—Gen. 13:18, *Marginal Translation*; 22:18

Abraham's faith in these promises caused him to look for a "city," a government, which would have foundations, whose builder and maker would be God. When put to the final test, Abraham's faith was such that he believed God would raise his son, Isaac, from the dead. And willingly giving up the boy as a sacrifice, Abraham "received him in a figure" from the dead.—Heb. 11:10,17-19

"FAITH COMETH BY HEARING"

In Romans 10:17, we read, "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." The reference here is to an active, demonstrated faith which God is pleased to count as righteousness. There are doubtless millions who have the ability to exercise faith in God, and these do believe that he exists. But only when God reveals himself through his Word, and invites cooperation in his plan of salvation, is the opportunity given to demonstrate faith by obedience.

Beginning with the death of Jacob, God chose his twelve sons and their families as a nation. To these, in due time, he gave his Law. To these, he sent his prophets, and through the prophets gave them an opportunity to know his plan as it was due to be understood, and to cooperate therein. Only a few responded in obedience, and this was because they believed God.

The faith of these was so strong that it reached beyond their immediate surroundings and experiences. Some received marvelous evidences of God's favor. Paul speaks of these, saying that they "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," were "valiant in fight," and "turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again."—Heb. 11:32-35

Strong faith was essential in these victorious experiences, and it enabled them to see the overruling providence of God in connection with them. The three Hebrews—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—quenched the violence of fire through their

faith (Dan. 3:19), and defied Nebuchadnezzar. They said that the God whom they served was able to deliver them. But they also told the king that if their God did not deliver them, they would not bow down to the image which he had set up. (vs. 18) Their faith was not that God would deliver them, but in God. They believed that whatever he did would be right. It is this sort of faith that God counts for righteousness.

Continuing, Paul writes, "Others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth."—Heb. 11:36-38

To pass through experiences such as these required a faith that could trust God even though there was no visible evidence of his care and protection. It was faith in the promises of God pertaining to the future that sustained them. They endured these things in order that they might obtain a "better resurrection." (vs. 35) Their concern was in the fulfillment of God's promises pertaining to the future. Like Abraham, with respect to Isaac, they believed that God was able, and would raise them from the dead in his own due time. This was the faith that was counted to them for righteousness.

While the whole nation of Israel was called and chosen by God, only these few, the Worthies of old, made their calling sure to the position designed for them in the Divine plan. They did this by their faith. It was a

faith that was demonstrated by their obedience under the most trying circumstances. Because they thus proved their worthiness, in the resurrection they will be given perfect human bodies through which they will be able to express their praises to God, and to serve him perfectly as "princes in all the earth."—Ps. 45:16

FAITH DURING THE GOSPEL AGE

The quality of faith is unchanged from age to age in the plan of God. It was true in the past and is true now that 'without faith it is impossible to please God.' No one can enjoy God's friendship without having faith in him. Those who are able to exercise faith are rewarded with whatever blessings the LORD may be dispensing at the time.

The woman, mentioned in Matthew 9:20-22, was cured of an "issue of blood" because of her great faith. Jesus said to her, "Thy faith hath made thee whole." The blind, referred to in Matthew 9:29, were told by Jesus, "According to your faith be it unto you." They exercised faith and received their sight.

The Bible reveals that there are degrees of faith. The disciples had faith to believe that Jesus was their Messiah. But, on the storm-tossed Sea of Galilee, they became fearful. (Matt. 8:24) After Jesus rescued Peter from the sea, he said to him, "O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?" (Matt. 14:31) On another occasion the disciples said to Jesus, "Increase our faith."—Luke 17:5

In Romans 1:16,17, we read, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; . . . For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith." The 'gospel of Christ' is received by faith,

but not instantaneously. It is revealed gradually as faith is able to receive and act upon it.

The apostles are good illustrations of this 'faith to faith' revealment and receiving of the Gospel. Even before they heard of Jesus they knew something of the Messianic promises and had faith in them. When they came into contact with Jesus and his wonderful ministry, they believed that he was the Messiah, and left all to follow him. Thus upon the basis of their faith God was dealing with them.

In his prayer, Jesus said to his Father concerning his apostles, "Thine they were, and thou gavest them me; and they have kept thy word." (John 17:6) These men were completely dedicated to God. They had faith in his Word, and were obedient to it. Prior to Pentecost they did not clearly understand the Divine plan, but they believed and obeyed that which they did understand. Because of this, God looked upon them as his people. 'Thine they were,' said Jesus. Like Abraham, they were God's friends. How richly their faith was rewarded!

KNOWLEDGE

The faith that opens the door to friendship with God is not a blind belief. It is faith in the plans and purposes of God to the extent that it is his will to reveal them. It was Abraham's faith in the promises that constituted the basis for his friendship with God. This was true of the apostles. It is still true today.

During the Gospel Age, God reveals his plans and purposes through his written Word. The purpose of this revelation, even as in the past, is to invite cooperation in the outworking of the Divine plan. During the Gospel Age, this cooperation can be only

through association with Jesus, and under his headship. Jesus said, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him." (John 6:44) This shows that there is a certain selection on God's part. He is not at the present time drawing the whole world, but only those whom he chooses.

God chooses those whom he knows are able to exercise faith in him and in his promises. In addition to their ability to exercise faith, these are also humble of heart and willing to learn. The first evidence of God's drawing power in their lives may well be in an experience, or series of experiences, which cause them to realize the futility and worthlessness of the material values so highly esteemed by the world in general.

Their hearts prepared, they are brought into contact with the Truth of the Word. This also is by the providence of God in the exercise of his drawing power. When they hear the Word, or read it, and their minds and hearts begin to respond to it. God is pleased, for this was the object of the exercise of his drawing power in their lives.

One of the first things learned from the Word of Truth is the fact that all are sinners, members of a sin-cursed and dying race. If faith lays hold upon this fact and the heart properly responds, the result will be repentance. Like the publican who went up to the Temple to pray, those who repent will cry out, "God be merciful to me a sinner."—Luke 18:13

The LORD is indeed merciful, for his providence has been working to bring about this very state of repentance. If God loved the whole world of sinners so much that he sent his Son to be their Redeemer, surely his love goes out much more to those who, when learning of his gracious provision

through Christ, begin to respond to his drawing power and demonstrate their faith by repenting of their sins, and asking for forgiveness.

Just as no one can come to Jesus unless drawn by the Father, Jesus explained that only through him could anyone have access to the Father. (John 14:6) This means that the Truth by which God draws, points the way to Jesus and to the redeeming merit of his shed blood. During this Gospel Age, the only object of thus being drawn to God through Christ is to become disciples of Christ. To be a disciple of Christ means to follow in his footsteps of self-sacrifice. It means to deny self and to take up one's cross and follow Jesus into death. It means to be "planted together in the likeness of his death."—Rom. 6:3-5

The footstep followers of Jesus walk in a path that is difficult to tread, a "narrow" way. (Matt. 7:14) To walk in this way means shame, ignominy, persecution, affliction, suffering, and death. In Revelation 20:4, it is described as being "beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God." And even though the word 'beheaded' is used symbolically, it denotes suffering and the loss of life.

These are some of the hard facts that are revealed to those whom the LORD is drawing. After repenting of their sins, they realize that they are faced with the necessity of making a decision as to whether or not they will accept the invitation to become disciples of Christ, and share in his sufferings. The LORD wants them to weigh this matter very carefully. This is indicated by Jesus in his parable concerning the man who was to build a tower. This man would be very foolish, the parable teaches, unless he first sat down and counted the cost.—Luke 14:28-30

Counting the cost of discipleship is the will of God for everyone who is drawn by his love to the point of repentance. Just as God is pleased with the attitude of true repentance, he is also pleased with those who sit down and consider the cost of full surrender to do his will as it is now revealed to be the terms of discipleship.

There is no set length of time during which one may 'contemplate the cost.' The Bible tells us that when Abraham was called of God he obeyed. We need not suppose that Abraham obeyed without giving consideration to all that was involved. It seems reasonable to conclude that he took some time to take into account the cost.

Since those whom God draws are invited to lay down their lives in his service, we may suppose that while they are seeking to know God, he encourages them by his promises, to make the right decision. This does not mean comparing the value of what is sacrificed with the worth of what God has promised in return. Those who have faith in the promises of God realize that there is no comparison. There is nothing here that needs to be counted. The counting is the giving of consideration to whether or not the trials of the narrow way will be more than can be borne. This must be in the light of God's promises of grace and strength to help in every time of need. Thus the measure of faith in God and in his promises will actually determine the decision that is made. Jesus asked James and John if they were able to drink of his cup and be baptized with his baptism. They replied, "We are able." (Mark 10:38,39) So with all who count the cost. If they have an unfaltering faith in the promises of God, their decision will also be 'we are able.' ■