

# Faith

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Matthew 8<sup>5-13</sup> / Galatians 2<sup>15-21</sup>

In God's Kingdom nothing is established apart from faith. Faith is the working principle of God's rule. By faith we live and move and have our being. Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to China, knew this. As a young man preparing to go to China, Hudson Taylor determined that he should learn to live by faith alone while he was still in England. His resolve was "to learn before leaving England to move man through God by prayer alone." He worked for a doctor and was paid quarterly. When the time drew near to receive his salary, Taylor was disturbed that his employer said nothing about it. Taylor had only one half-crown piece, but he determined not to break his resolution and ask for his salary. While visiting a needy home on the Lord's Day, Taylor felt led of God to give his last coin to the needy family. The next day he received an anonymous gift through the mail, four times what he had given to the poor! The following Saturday, the doctor finished up his work and said, "Taylor, is not your salary due again?" Taylor told him that it was and became disappointed when he learned that the doctor had forgotten about the salary due and sent all his funds to the bank! He prayed about the matter (for he had bills of his own to pay) and left it with the Lord. That evening, the doctor visited him and said that one of his richest patients had come over after hours to pay his bill! He gave the money to Taylor, who rejoiced. He had learned he could trust God and therefore go to China as a missionary.

The story we heard from the Bible today of the healing of the centurion's servant isn't just a miracle story or another episode in Jesus' ministry or even a dig at the Jewish authorities. Rather this is, in itself, an anthology of faith. It is a series of little lessons about faith which lets us into the inner sanctum of this amazing word and allows us to see how central it is to the Christian faith. The writer to the Hebrews says quite plainly,

**<sup>6</sup>And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. (Heb 11)**

Faith is the 'life principle' of both Christians and the Church. We literally 'live by faith.' However this is a particular faith for the faith we live by is, as Paul says, 'faith in Christ.'

**<sup>19</sup>For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; <sup>20</sup>and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal 2)**

If we begin at the beginning of the story of the Roman Centurion the first thing we should note is that this man wasn't just a member of another race but that he was a member of a race which now occupied all of Israel and provided a military rule. So he was, for all intents and purposes an enemy of the Jews and yet, says Jesus, none other in Israel had shown such faith. We may take from this a number of things but perhaps the most important is that faith in God is not a matter of race or, indeed, of culture. **Faith will arise in anyone who truly believes in Christ.** This man was prepared to do so, apparently, more completely than anyone else Christ had come across.

These days we face a problem however because it has almost become fashionable to praise faith. Many films and books wind their stories around a hero or heroine who displays remarkable faith in the object of their love be it human or otherwise. The old series called 'Lassie' about the border collie dog who always came to the rescue and who was so faithful did precisely this and we loved it. Harry Potter is, in a sense, a story of faith; faith in magic, faith in Harry's love for his friends and family. There's nothing like a story of faith to raise our general level of hope in the world. But this is not what the Bible refers to. Indeed, though these stories are often great they may encourage us to think along lines that are completely at odds with God. Faith that springs from the goodness or courage of a human heart may well be great and useful but it is also dangerous because

whatever relies on the human heart must take into account the vagaries of that same heart.

Michael Shermer, publisher of Skeptic magazine and author of The Science of Good and Evil, writes: I once had the opportunity to ask Thomas Keneally, author of Schindler's List, what he thought was the difference between Oskar Schindler, rescuer of Jews and hero of his story, and Amon Goeth, the Nazi commandant of the Plaszow concentration camp. His answer was revealing. Not much, he said. Had there been no war, Mr. Schindler and Mr. Goeth might have been drinking buddies and business partners, morally obtuse, perhaps, but relatively harmless. What a difference a war makes, especially to the moral choices that lead to good and evil. Shermer goes on to quote Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

If you can start the day without caffeine; if you can get going without pep pills; if you can always be cheerful, ignoring aches and pains; if you can resist complaining and boring people with your troubles; if you can eat the same food every day and be grateful for it; if you can understand when your loved ones are too busy to give you any time; if you can overlook it when those you love take it out on you when through no fault of yours something goes wrong; if you can take criticism and blame without resentment; if you can ignore a friend's limited education and never correct him; if you can resist treating a rich friend better than a poor friend; if you can face the world without lies and deceit; if you can conquer tension without medical help; if you can relax without liquor; if you can sleep without the aid of drugs; if you can say honestly that deep in your heart you have no prejudice against creed, color, religion, or politics; then, my friend, you are almost as good as your dog.

Oswald Chambers once said to his pupils these wise words, **'If we place our faith in human goodness we will go under when testing comes.'** In other words, if our hope is in human goodness that hope will be shattered and we will be terribly disappointed. The Faith of the Bible is not a product of the human heart – it is a

response to the Living God. This is what separates it from all else that might be called faith.

Nor is the Faith of the Bible particularly religious. Note that there was nothing particularly religious about this centurion. He was not noted as being a supporter of a synagogue or a believer in the Jewish God. He was, for all we know, a pagan. Religious action is action we recognize as being performed in the name of a particular religion and because of that religion. Christ's actions were rarely able to be put into this box. What set Christ apart was His love for those who were desperately in need and for those who were beyond the pale of normal religious action. So He loved those who were not pure Jews and He loved lepers and he loved poor people and he loved children and he loved prostitutes.

Let me be clear here. This is not to condemn religious activity for where it is performed in and out of true faith in God there is nothing wrong with it. The icon, however, of religious action in the Bible is the Law. Obey and perform this and you were justified. But Paul specifically says that this became and was always, in fact, clearly impossible because the only possibility of true justification came with Christ.

**<sup>1</sup>There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup>For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. <sup>3</sup>For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, <sup>4</sup>so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Roms 8)**

Faith comes by **receiving** Christ; only because Christ lives within us and brings new life to our dead spirits. Faith is the result of God's working within us – not the result either of us being good or being religious.

Finally let's not imagine that faith is heroic action – the act of leaping before one looks. Heroes are fine people. They often sacrifice themselves for others and God

will not look lightly on this kind of behavior. But heroic action goes both ways. We can be heroically good and we can be heroically evil and often people who are wrong are heroically wrong and one has to admire them even in their wrongness. There were many heroic people fighting against the allies who laid down their lives for their friends in the various world wars we've experienced last century. We can and should admire the sacrifice of heroes but this is not the faith of the Bible. Heroism can also be foolish disguised as bravery and many have fallen because they didn't think through their actions and were sure they could get away with what they were doing.

During the Battle of the Wilderness in the Civil War, Union general John Sedgwick was inspecting his troops. At one point he came to a parapet, over which he gazed out in the direction of the enemy. His officers suggested that this was unwise and perhaps he ought to duck while passing the parapet. "Nonsense," snapped the general. "They couldn't hit an elephant at this distance." A moment later Sedgwick fell to the ground, fatally wounded.

Faith may call us occasionally to be heroic but this is not the heart of faith. The heart of faith is that we become dead to the world so that we might be alive to Christ; that we identify ourselves with His goals and His ways of achieving those goals. So often, I think, we invoke a kind of heroism largely because we are impatient for the world to see Christ as we see Him. So we push others, heroically, to see Christ and all they end up seeing is a pushy person.

And who is this God who calls us to faith? Who is this God who dares call us to belief in the face of a world of death and pain? Who is this God of faith in a faithless world? This is who God is...

A grandfather received the terrible, terrible news that his three-year-old grandson in Denver had been murdered by his daughter's live-in boyfriend. The little boy was on life support in order to donate organs, and the grandfather wanted to be there for his daughter when doctors would turn off the life support system. The last-minute flights were set, but then ... delays. It seemed like he was going to miss his connecting flight for sure. But much to his surprise, the plane had not left. When he arrived, the pilot was waiting at the gate for him. "Are you

Mark?" the pilot asked. When the grandfather said he was, the pilot added: "We held the plane for you and we're so sorry about the loss of your grandson. They can't go anywhere without me, and I wasn't going anywhere without you. Now relax. We'll get you there. And again, I'm so sorry." This is the God who comes to us from the pages of the Bible – the who says to you and I this morning... "They can't go anywhere without me, and I'm not going anywhere without you."

Put your trust in this God today and you will find faith arising within you. Believe in Him my friends and faith will be your reward. Faith is not a result of our effort but is the fruit of our willingness to believe. Will you believe today?