

...and Faith

When I was a teenager, I once heard a talk on the Christian life. Comparing the believer with a vessel at sea, the speaker said, "The ship must be in the sea, but the sea must not be in the ship." My memory is that he was encouraging his hearers not to withdraw from the world, like hermits, but to be involved with the world as Christians, while not getting tainted by the world's values.

I also remember reading about the first ship that Hornblower captured, in one of the novels about him by C. S. Forester (Mr. Midshipman Hornblower, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1950, chapter two). The ship had a cargo of rice in sacks. During the battle before its capture, a cannon ball had entered the ship's hold, through the side of the ship, from under the water line. When this was discovered later, the rice had already begun to swell, because of the water that had got into the sacks. Although frantic efforts were made to throw the rice overboard, it was too late; the sacks had already wedged themselves together, and could not be dislodged. Before long, the whole ship was splitting apart, and Hornblower soon had the sad experience of seeing his first prize of war sink beneath the waves.

In the last chapter, we considered some areas of major importance that believers need to sort out, if they are going to call themselves followers of Jesus. This could be compared to making the ship sound and water tight, in the way that Hornblower failed to do. However, it is a fact that any sound sailing ship will take on a certain amount of water, whether by waves coming on board, or through seams between planks that are not as watertight as they might be. The bilges should be pumped out every day. This may be compared with Christians exercising faith.

Clearly, a person needs to make a once and for all decision to put their faith in Jesus. However, just as with repentance, there is a need to keep that faith renewed and active, day by day. We will consider how to do that in this chapter.

Paul referred to those who would inherit the kingdom of heaven by steady persistence in doing good (Rom 2:7). This phrase needs some explanation, as it sounds at first hearing as if believers get themselves to heaven by their own efforts. This could not possibly be what Paul means, as the first eight chapters of Romans, from which the quotation is taken, are devoted to the argument that Christians are saved by God's free gift alone, and not because of anything they have done (Rom 3:22-24).

Rather, we can explain this phrase by using the analogy of the train journey to London which we suggested in the last chapter. By their initial act of faith, the travellers boarded the train. But they will only arrive at London if they persist in staying on the train. They must resist the attractions of the stations that the train stops at along the line, and not get lured out onto the platform. If they do, they will not arrive at London.

This is not to say that the travellers reach London through any merit or effort of their own. It is the train that gets them there. All they need to do is stay in it.

This picture illustrates what it means for a believer to exercise faith. As with the train, the believer's journey to heaven is not the result of his own efforts. Everything of importance is done for the Christian by God. There is free forgiveness of sins, because Jesus died in his place, taking the penalty which the sinner deserved (1 Pet 2:24). Then there is a transformation of the character, from the inside out, through the fruits of the holy Spirit as we saw, and doing the works of Jesus by gifts of the Spirit. All of these are freely given, not worked for (Eph 2:8-9), and there is no credit to the individual.

Having said this, however, the believer does need to cooperate by exercising faith. This is what allows it all to happen. Faith covers a variety of events. We saw earlier that faith is an active, definite affair. The policeman using his authority to prevent the man from parking on the double yellow lines took a firm stand. Faith requires a decisive act of the will.

Some of us feel very weak, and we are not sure whether we can manage this kind of thing. It all sounds rather robust. But it has been wisely pointed out that the strength of the believer's faith is not the critical issue. When crossing a stream, strong faith in a weak plank will land you in trouble, but weak faith in a strong plank will generally get you across. As Jesus put it, when it comes to

faith, all you need is the tiniest seed (Matt 17:20); it is the greatness of God that achieves the results.

Jesus knew all about human weakness. In particular, we have a tendency to fear. It is striking how often Jesus told people not to be afraid. "Don't be afraid; just believe", he said to the man whose daughter had just died (Mark 5:36). When he was walking on the water and his disciples thought he was a ghost, Jesus said, "It is I. Don't be afraid (Mark 6:50)." Knowing that the small size of the group of followers might daunt some of them, Jesus said, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your father will give you the kingdom (Luke 12:32)." At the resurrection, when the women saw angels at the tomb, they were told, "Don't be alarmed (Mark 16:6)."

Fear is something that Jesus came to deal with. In each of the above examples, putting faith in Jesus was the answer to fear. On a similar theme, disciples are not to worry about their needs of food and clothing. God the heavenly father will look after his children (Matt 6:25, 33). As Jesus said, "Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows (Luke 12:7)." Disciples are not even to worry about being put on trial by hostile authorities, because of their faith (Mark 13:11). They are not to fear those who can kill the body (Luke 12:4). If their lives are forfeit, they are not to worry about lack of a place in heaven (John 14:1 & 27).

The picture which emerges is that disciples are so to cultivate their faith in God that nothing in this life can fill them with fear, not even impending death, because they know that God will help them. God is totally trustworthy. In the early centuries of the Christian era, martyrs were to prove the reality of these words by enduring horrible tortures and death without weakening in their resolve.

Believers today can find that whatever their natural tendencies, "with God, all things are possible," whether in remaining single (Matt 19:26) or in matters of money (Mark 10:27), or in a barren woman giving birth in old age (Luke 1:37).

In a daily pumping out of the bilges, Christians rid their lives of fear by putting faith in Jesus. He fills them with love instead. As John wrote, "Perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18)."

Faith and love are closely related. Along with hope, they are characteristics of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 13:13, Gal 5:22). They will grow as believers give the Holy Spirit free rein in their lives. John went so far as to promise that believers in Jesus would enjoy victory over the evil one (1 John 2:13). However weak they may begin, Christians need not remain defeated people.

There is a danger that in the light of the promised victory over all obstacles, Christians could become over-confident and triumphalistic. This is unhelpful. Victory is theirs, but they need to watch how they behave in the light of this truth. It is better to remain weak (2 Cor 12:10).

In particular, Jesus said believers are not to judge others (Matt 7:1). There has been a tendency to look down on others in the Church as in every other sphere. Jesus cautioned against it. Whatever measure his followers use in judging others will be used against them (v2).

Rather, believers are to forgive others, so their own sins may be forgiven (Mark 11:25). Peter once asked how often he should forgive someone - perhaps seven times? He was told seventy times seven. (Matt 18:21-22, cf Luke 17:4). The fact is that it is not open to believers to hold grudges. It is up to God to repay (Rom 12:18-20).

Clearly, forgiveness is not always easy. If someone steps on your toe in error in a crowded place, forgiveness is almost automatic. But if someone were to stamp hard on your toe deliberately as an act of hatred, forgiveness is clearly much harder. We detect a sliding scale; the greater the hurt, the harder it is to forgive. Some readers of this book will have been so hurt by the attitudes and actions of others that forgiveness seems almost impossible.

Jesus never allowed people to hold onto bitterness in any circumstances. We read that "envy rots the bones (Prov 14:30)." This may even be true literally as well as figuratively - the relationship between attitudes and disease is only dimly appreciated at present. It seems best not to swallow one's anger against someone, but to recognise it fully, and then by an act of the will, choose to forgive the person. There is no alternative to full forgiveness. The Lord's prayer takes it for granted that other people have all been forgiven (Matt 6:9-15).

As well as being non-judgmental and forgiving, Christians are to be humble in their estimate of themselves (Rom 12:3). Jesus expressed this by imagining people seating themselves at a banquet, and then being moved to somewhere more appropriate by the host. How much better to take a low place and then be invited higher, than to be moved downwards (Luke 14:8).

This principle can be seen at work in the story of the Pharisee and the tax gatherer. The former was taken up with his own righteousness; the latter was only too conscious of his sins. It was the tax gatherer who won God's approval (Luke 18:9-14; cf Isa 2:12-18).

We see, then, that complete victory is available for the Christian, even over death itself (Rom 8:35-39, 1 Cor 15:25-26 & 55-57). This will be expressed in quietness and trust (Isa 30:15). Armed with faith, hope and love, and filled with the Holy Spirit, Christians can stand firm, even when the going is very hard (Eph 6:13).

All of these attitudes relate to faith. The person who has faith will develop complete trust in God in all circumstances, however threatening. He will not judge others, nor harbour grudges, nor allow anger to last, but learns an attitude of forgiveness to all who harm him. He keeps the sea out of his hold, as it were, by keeping his hold on the Lord. This is to live by faith.

We will end this chapter by considering the extent of the power available to believers in this area of exercising faith. "Have faith in God", Jesus said, and even mountains will move into the sea at your command (Mark 11:22-24). We noted before that to be effective, prayer needs to be in the name of Jesus, and according to the Father's will, in the power of the Holy Spirit. If that is so, then there is no limit to what can be achieved - every mountain and hill can be made low, and every gate be forced to open, before the King of Glory (Isa 40:4, Ps 24:7-10, Matt 16:18).

Not many Christians have experienced this degree of victory over obstacles. Our tendency in the light of teaching like this is to muster up all the faith we can in a supreme effort. This is seldom successful.

Faith does not work that way. Rather, it is a matter of believers applying the teaching we have been considering day by day, until it becomes second nature. Power will increase gradually as this takes place. Jesus' words can be seen as an encouragement to what can be achieved by his followers as they persist in the way of faith.

When reading the Greek of Mark 11:22 (*echete pistin theou*), Hudson Taylor noticed that it might be literally rendered, "Have the faithfulness of God". He found the concept of holding onto the faithfulness of God most helpful (2 Tim 2:13). In other words, it is not a case of believers trying to work faith up, but rather of receiving by faith what comes down from God. As James put it, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, from the Father of the heavenly lights (James 1:17)."

The faith believers are to pursue is the inner certainty that God has everything under control (Rom 8:28), and that when they know his will in a given situation, even the most stubborn obstacles can be overcome by prayer offered in faith (see eg. James 5:13-18, Rev 17:14). It is God's will that matters, not theirs, and the more Christians are in tune with him, the more they will find both that opposition from the enemy increases, and also that victory over difficulties in their way is increasingly theirs (Phil 4:13, 1 John 2:14b).

Both this and the previous chapter have come under the heading of baptism. The ideal in baptism is that the believer undertakes a dual turning. Firstly, he turns from all that opposes God in his life. Secondly, he takes on faith and trust in God in their place. Both actions need to be maintained in the days which follow.

With these attitudes, the believer is ready to be filled with the Holy Spirit, which is the subject we turn to next.