

A VICTORIOUS FAITH

"Increase our faith" Luke 17:5

About nineteen centuries ago, Jesus said to His disciples on the storm-swept water, when they were all scared and filled with dismay, "Where is your faith?" This is a question that needs to be asked frequently, and it needs to be faithfully answered each time that it is asked, because it is about a most vital matter.

I wonder if as disciples of Jesus in these modern days we realize how much our Lord had to say to the disciples of His own day about their faith in God? In that connection, I am not thinking so much about what we call "saving faith," as of the faith in God which enriches and ennoble the Christian life and fits and equips for service. How central and vital was the place Jesus accorded to this feature of Christian living! He had more to say concerning their faith in God than their prayers to God or their service for men. It was as though He had said to them: "If you only knew the power of faith to get things done, you would seek first of all and most of all the gift of a living faith in the living God." Faith in God is the dynamite of the Christian life and is always at the disposal of the disciple of Jesus for life and service.

It is a very remarkable thing about the teaching of Jesus, that although He had so much to say to His disciples about their faith in God, He never told them what faith was, and so far as I know never defined it. It may have been because faith is one of those elemental qualities of the life of God in the soul that baffles definition. It is one of those invisible, indescribably and irresistible qualities of the spiritual life that can only be understood by its accomplishments. We learn what faith is by what it does. It is a cause known only by its effects. It is true of many other things that we only know what they are by what they do. For example, there is electricity. No one can tell us exactly what it is. We only know what it is by what it does, as it lights our homes, schools, and churches.

Inseparably connected with repentance toward God is faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. Faith in Christ is more than intellectual assent to the doctrine that He is the Son of God, or that He died for our sins and rose again, or that He is the Saviour of sinners. It is trust in Christ as Saviour and surrender to Him as Lord. Nothing short of this is Christian faith in the full sense of the term. Trust in Him as Saviour and surrender to Him as Lord are not two things, but one. Faith is the soulful response of the whole being to Jesus Christ.

What can we learn in these trying days about the faith in God which will help fit and equip us for noble living and strenuous service? What is the law of faith that we may learn? Is it not just this, that in the Christian life:

No faith in God means no power,
Little faith in God means little power.
Great faith in God means great power?

And great faith means faith great in its simplicity, in its directness, in its intensity, in its utter dependence upon God, and in its assurance. And great faith means great power, great liberty, great goodness, great victory, great blessing and great usefulness. No wonder our Lord adjured His first followers and all their successors to "have faith in God."

This is exactly the time to have faith in God. This is the vital message for us today, and it will be through all the days to come. It is the most vital message of all because faith is the most vital matter in the Christian life. Faith is the foundation-grace of the whole Christian life. His Book tells us that "without faith it is impossible to please God." "This is the victory that overcometh the world,

even our faith." We shall not have victory without faith. The victory that overcometh the world is a trusting, obedient faith in Christ. Faith is supreme in all the relations of life. It is supreme in the home. It is supreme in the world of business.

In this service, let us think together on a prayer for the increase of faith. It was offered by Christ's early disciples in a time when a great obligation was laid upon them by the Master Himself. The story is told in Luke 17. He said: "Take heed to yourselves; If thy brother trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, 'I repent'; thou shalt forgive him. And the apostles said unto the Lord, 'INCREASE OUR FAITH!'. As much as to say, "Lord, if Thou dost expect that of us, then increase our faith."

This is a suitable prayer for us today and tomorrow, for all of us are acutely aware that we are living now in a day when the tumults and confusions and distressing trials of the world cast their shadows everywhere. One wonders if we have ever faced a more serious day than we are facing right now throughout the world. But it isn't a time for the weakening of faith, but for the strengthening of faith. God reigns. He has not forgotten. He waits to be gracious, and when the people, you and I, and our fellowmen, assume the right attitude toward God, He will make bare His arm with delivering mercy.

"Careless seems the Great Avenger,
History's pages but record
One death grapple in the darkness,
'Twixt false systems and the Word.

Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne,
But that scaffold sways the future,
And behind the dim unknown
Standeth Christ within the shadows,
Keeping watch above His own."

Whatever the difficulties that come to try us, we are following a leader who is steadfast, almighty, all-merciful and gracious.

I. A Victorious Faith Is Often Lacking.

The undoing sin of everybody is lack of faith in God. Well may we tell the lost around us that their unfaith, their unbelief, will result in their utter ruin. The most destructive of all sins is that of unbelief. "He that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."

Even so, the undoing sin for Christians is their unfaith or unbelief. Israel of old was kept out of the Promised Land for forty years because of unbelief. Even today, God's people are likewise kept out of many Promised Lands and blessings because of unbelief. We often doubt God's ability or His willingness to help us, or both, and consequently we go our ways, groping, and floundering, and failing. It is not only a pity but it is a sin, if we are not steadily growing in faith.

Let us remember that our faith may be misplaced. How and when is our faith misplaced?

1. When it is placed in mere appearances.

It is a constant temptation to us to walk by sight and not by faith. The

temptation is often with us to calculate wholly with human resources, and to leave God out of our plans and activities. How we are swayed, how we are lifted up or cast down by mere appearances! If the weather be fair, if no lowering clouds come to menace, our hearts seem hopeful and our faith buoyant. But that is not the test. How is it when the heavens are dark with clouds? How is it when appearances are against us?

I heard Dr. George W. Truett tell the following story: "In the beginning months of my humble ministry, I was the financial secretary of one of our noblest Christian schools--Baylor University in Texas. I was charged with the task of securing funds to clear the institution of burdensome debt. At that time, the president of the board of trustees was the far-famed pastor and preacher, Dr. B. H. Carroll.

His counsel and cooperative help with the young secretary were unceasing and incomparable. Again and again he accompanied me on speaking tours in quest of gifts for the institution. On one of such tours unusual preparations had been made for a large mass meeting for the enlistment of the people in an important section of the state. We reached the given community the evening before the widely heralded mass meeting of the coming morrow. We learned that large plans had been made for the meeting and a vast attendance was expected. During the night the clouds emptied their floods upon the earth, making it impossible for the vast crowds to assemble as had been planned and expected. Only the few could gather, but the great leader and preacher, Dr. Carroll, spoke to the small company with marvelous fervor and comprehensiveness on the lofty claims of Christian education.

Then he announced that the young secretary would speak, after the singing of a hymn, and at once secure from the people their gifts for the noble institution. While the hymn was being sung, I wrote on a card, suggesting to the great preacher that I would speak for a few moments as he had suggested, but in view of the small company present he would doubtless agree with me that a collection should not then be attempted. Quickly, he wrote these words on the reverse side of the card: 'Never take counsel of your fears or appearances; do your whole duty and you may unfearingly leave the results with God. Certainly, you will ask the people present to make their gifts today.' I did as he suggested, and the gifts from the people, on that day of the small congregation, were indescribably impressive. Women gave the rings from their fingers, and men gave their watches and their purses. It was one of the days of God's right hand among His people. It marked an epoch in their lives. But let us hark back to the epochal message that was on the card: 'Never take counsel of your fears or appearances; do your whole duty, and you may unfearingly leave the results with God.'" Is not this our abiding temptation, to take counsel of our fears and of appearances? If we follow such counsel we are doomed to inevitable defeat.

2. When it is placed in human agency.

This temptation is likewise constant and very menacing. To the degree that we put our confidence in the arm of flesh, we shall fail in Christ's work.

All along the unfolding centuries, God has surprised the people with His strange choices. He chose His early apostles from the humblest surroundings. Charles H. Spurgeon was taken to London before he was out of his teens, and in half a dozen years his testimony for Christ had challenged London and the British Isles and the whole round earth. See also the far-reaching testimony of Dwight L. Moody. Two continents were lifted closer to God by the testimony of that plain man. Wherein were the hidings of power in the lives of these mighty servants of God? They were plain men, from humble surroundings. They did not have the training of the schools. And yet they moved the world, and their vital testimony lives on and on. What is God saying to us as we gaze upon such men? He is saying this: "Your faith is not to stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God." Does it not comfort your

hearts, even as it comforts mine, to reflect that God may now be getting ready some humble lad, in some humble home, here, or there, or yonder, whose testimony for Christ a few years hence will rally America and the world to follow our risen Saviour and Lord? Our faith is not to stand in human agency or the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

3. When we limit God.

One of the most arresting expressions in all of the Bible is: "They limited God." The Psalmist said, "They limited the Holy One of Israel." The gospels expressly tell us that Christ could not do any mighty works in a certain section because of the attitude of the people there, namely, their unbelief. At first thought, the statement that God can be limited seems utterly impossible. He can be so limited, else man would be a mere machine. Men are clothed with moral freedom and can say "yes" or "no" to God. The highest prerogative of a human life is the power of choice, and such prerogative is likewise life's gravest danger. Everywhere in the Bible it is written large that men can limit God, and what is more, they do sadly limit Him. How may we limit God?

(1) By our praying.

The Apostle James said, "Ye have not, because ye ask not." And does he not also remind us that we can limit God by praying with the wrong motive? "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts." Our prayers may be dictatorial instead of humbly submissive to God. Their true meaning may be, "Not Thy will but mine be done." The heart of all true prayer is unreserved submission to the will of God. His will is always right and safe and best. Why should men hesitate to pray, without stint or reserve, that His will may be done?

(2) By our living.

Our lives are either channels or clogs, through which blessings may come to the people, or be hindered from coming to them. Beyond question, the deepest wounds that are ever inflicted upon Jesus are those that come from His friends. "And one shall say unto Him, 'What are these wounds in thine hand?'.....Then, He shall answer, 'Those with which I was wounded in the house of My friends.'" The best argument for Christianity is a faithful, joyful, consistent Christian. Every Christian whose life is wrong with God positively hinders God and limits Him by that much.

(3) By our idleness.

Idleness is a terrible menace. The old saying is wretchedly true that "An idle brain is the devil's workshop." The other old saying is equally true that "Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do." Anywhere and everywhere, idleness is a menace.

(4) By our short-sightedness.

We look at difficulties and fail to look beyond them to God. We talk about baffling situations and hopeless cases and leave God out. Against every difficulty, the Lord puts His searching inquiry: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" What kind of a God have we? Do we have a great God or is He helpless before the stern facts of sin and sorrow and death?

When the noble Morrison was sailing, as a young man to be a missionary, in China, the captain of the boat taunted him with the question: "Do you think that

you can save the heathen Chinese?" The young man made the simple, but complete reply: "No, Sir, but I think that God can." The message of the immortal Carey is ever to be kept in our faithful remembrance: "Attempt great things for God; expect great things from God." Where is the faith that laughs at difficulties because it looks beyond them to God?

II. A Victorious Faith Is Desirable.

Evidently, the apostles of our Lord felt that there was something lacking in their souls which they would gladly possess. The doctrine of the great Teacher, perhaps, was not so clear to them as they could have wished; or perhaps they felt themselves a painfully long distance behind their Leader in their spirit and bearing; or it may be that they found themselves unable to do such works as they judged that they ought to be able to do, in and through the Name of the great Healer. But, whatever their source of dissatisfaction, they agreed that they were in spiritual want. They agreed that what was wanted was an increase of faith. And they were perfectly right in their judgment. Consequently, they became more enlightened, more spiritual, more devoted and more useful.

An increase of faith is desirable:—

1. For the sake of our holiness.

It enriches our characters. It helps to obtain other spiritual blessings, for they are bestowed according to the measure of faith.

2. For the sake of our happiness.

3. For the sake of our usefulness.

Only a faith which is a living and growing power, like the mustard seed in the soil, will triumph over the difficulties to be met and mastered in life. The fact is that:—

(1) A formal faith is not worth anything.
It deludes and misleads.

(2) A feeble faith will accomplish little, if anything.
a. It enters upon, but abandons, the goodly enterprise.
b. It shrinks from open avowal.
c. It makes a feeble fight in the hour of battle.
d. It sinks in the hour of trial

(3) A living, appropriating faith is the only effective power. A faith that, like the mustard seed in the soil, puts forth the power, of life, and appropriates to itself the riches that are around it in order that, further on, it may bear fruit—this is a power that will be felt. It will accomplish great and wonderful things. It will uproot great evils in God's name and strength. It will also upraise noble structures of good.

4. For the sake of our comfort.

Nothing but faith can sustain us under dark and trying providences. A victorious faith imparts consolation in the hour of sorrow. Its importance in the hour of death renders it unspeakably desirable.

III. A Victorious Faith Is Possible.

This will appear from:—

1. The goodness and power of its Author.
2. The progressive nature of Christianity.
3. The admonitions of the Bible.
4. The experiences of the disciples.
 - (1) They had faith.
 - (2) They did not have enough faith.
 - (3) They could not increase their own faith.
 - (4) The Lord Jesus could and did increase their faith.

How may we strengthen our faith?

1. By making it a matter of earnest prayer.
If you are not a person of prayer, you are not a person of faith. Jesus gave His disciples a great task to accomplish, and they cried back to Him, "Lord if you expect that of us, increase our faith." Prayer always increases faith, and faith ever inclines to prayer.
2. By studying the character of the object of faith.
Meditate on the power, wisdom and goodness of our Lord Jesus Christ.
3. By avoiding everything that tends to impair its strength.
4. By pleading the promises of God.
He would have us plead His promises when we call upon Him.
5. By seeking the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit.
How marvelous is His power! How wonderful is His guidance!

Surely, the prayer of the apostles of old is the right prayer for us today and all the days: "Lord, increase our faith."