

Living by Faith

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Signs of the Times : March 25, 1889

“The just shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:17).

This statement is the summing up of what the apostle has to say about the gospel. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation, but only “to every one that believeth;” in it the righteousness of God is revealed. The righteousness of God is the perfect law of God, which is but the transcript of his own righteous will. All unrighteousness is sin, or the transgression of the law. The gospel is God’s remedy for sin; its work, therefore, must be to bring men into harmony with the law, —to cause the workings of the righteous law to be manifested in their lives. But this is wholly a work of faith, —the righteousness of God is revealed from “faith to faith,”—faith in the beginning, and faith to the end, —as it is written, “The just shall live by faith.”

This is true in all ages since the fall of man, and will be true until the saints of God have his name in their foreheads, and see him as he is. It was from the prophet Habakkuk (Hab. 2:4) that the apostle quoted the statement. If the prophets had not revealed it, the first Christians could not have known of it; for they had only the Old Testament. To say that in the most ancient times men had but an imperfect idea of faith in Christ is to say that there were no just men in those times. But Paul goes right back to the very beginning and cites an instance of saving faith. He says: “By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous” (Heb. 11:4). He says of Noah, also, that it was by faith that he built the ark to the saving of his house; “by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith” (Heb. 11:7). We say that their faith was in Christ, because it was faith unto salvation, and besides the name of Jesus “there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

There are too many who try to live the Christian life on the strength of the faith which they exercised when they realized their need of pardon for the sins of their past life. They know that God alone can pardon sins, and that he does this through Christ; but they imagine that having once been started they must run the race in their own strength. We know that many have this idea, first, because we have heard some say so, and second, because there are such multitudes of professed Christians who show the working of no greater power than their own. If they ever have anything to say in social meeting, besides the ever-recurring formula, “I want to be a Christian, so that I may be saved,” they tell only of a past experience, of the joy they had when they first believed. Of the joy of living for God, and of walking with him by faith, they know nothing, and he who tells of it speaks a strange language to them. But the apostle carries this matter of faith clear through to the glorious kingdom, in the following most forcible illustration: —

“By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him; for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God. But 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. 11:5, 6).

Note the argument to prove that Enoch was translated by faith: Enoch was translated because he walked with God, and had the testimony that he pleased God; but without faith it is impossible to please God. That is enough to prove the point. Without faith not an act can be performed that will meet the approval of God. Without faith the best deeds that a man can do will come infinitely short of the perfect righteousness of God, which is the only standard. Wherever real faith is found it is a good thing; but the best of faith in God to take away the load of the sins of the past will profit a person nothing unless it is carried right through in ever-increasing measure until the close of his probation.

We have heard many people tell how hard they found it to do right; their Christian life was most unsatisfactory to them, being marked only by failure, and they were tempted to give up in discouragement. No wonder they get discouraged; continual failure is enough to discourage anybody. The bravest soldier in the world would become faint-hearted if he had been defeated in every battle. Sometimes these persons will mournfully tell that they have about lost confidence in themselves. Poor souls, if they would only lose confidence in themselves entirely, and would put their whole trust in the one who is mighty to save, they would have a different story to tell. They would then “joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Says the apostle, “Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, Rejoice” (Phil. 4:4). The man, who doesn’t rejoice in God, even though tempted and afflicted, is not fighting the good fight of faith. He is fighting the poor fight of self-confidence and defeat.

All the promises of final happiness are to the overcomer. “To him that overcometh,” says Jesus, “will I give to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne” (Rev. 3:21). “He that overcometh shall inherit all things,” says the Lord. (Rev. 21:7). An overcomer is one who gains victories. The inheriting is not the overcoming; that is only the reward for overcoming. The overcoming is now; the victories to be gained are victories over the lusts of the flesh, the lusts of the eyes, and the pride of life,—victories over self and selfish indulgences. The man who fights and sees the foe give way, may rejoice; nobody can keep him from rejoicing, for joy comes spontaneously as the result of seeing the enemy give way. Some folks look with dread upon the thought of having to wage a continual warfare with self and worldly lusts. That is because they do not as yet know anything about the joy of victory; they have experienced only defeat. But it isn’t so doleful a thing to battle constantly, when there is continual victory. The old veteran of a hundred battles, who has been victorious in every fight, longs to be at the scene of conflict. Alexander’s soldiers, who under his command never knew defeat, were always impatient to be led into the fray. Each victory increased their strength, which was born only of courage, and correspondingly diminished that of the vanquished foe. Now how may we gain continual victories in our spiritual warfare? Listen to the beloved disciples:—

“For whatsoever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4).

Read again the words of the apostle Paul:—

“I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

Here is the secret of strength. It is Christ, the Son of God, the one to whom all power in Heaven and earth is given, who does the work. If he lives in the heart to do the work, is it boasting to say that continual victories may be gained? Yes it is boasting; but it is boasting in the Lord, and that is allowable. Says the psalmist, “My soul shall make her boast in the Lord;” and Paul says: “But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world” (Gal. 6:14).

The soldiers of Alexander were reckoned invincible. Why? Was it because they were naturally stronger and more courageous than all their enemies? No; but because they were led by Alexander. Their strength was in his leadership. Under another leader they would often have been defeated. When the Union army was fleeing, panic-stricken, before the enemy at Winchester, the presence of Sheridan turned their defeat into victory. Without him the men were a quaking mob; with him at their head they were an invincible army. If you had listened to the remarks after the battle, of the soldiers who served under those and similar leaders, you would have heard the praises of their general mingled with all their rejoicing. They were strong because he was; they were inspired by the same spirit that he had.

Well, our captain is the Lord of hosts. He has met the chiefest foe of all and has vanquished him single-handed. Those who follow him invariably go forth conquering and to conquer. Oh, that those who profess to be his followers would put their trust in him, and then, by the repeated victories that they would gain, they would show forth the praises of Him who has called them out of darkness into his marvelous light.

John says that he that is born of God overcomes the world, through faith. Faith lays hold of the arm of God, and his mighty power does the work. How the power of God can work in a man, accomplishing that which he could not possibly do for himself, no one can tell. It would be as easy to tell how God can give life to the dead. Says Jesus: “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). How the Spirit works in a man to subdue his passions, and to make him victorious over pride, envy, and selfishness, is known only to the Spirit; it is sufficient for us to know that it is done, and will be done in everyone who wants that work wrought in him, above all things else, and who trusts God for the performance of it.

We cannot tell how Peter was enabled to walk on the water, when the waves were rolling about him; but we know that at the command of the Lord he did it. So long as he

kept his eye fixed on the Master, divine power enabled him to walk as easily as though it were solid rock underneath; but when he looked at the waves, possibly with a feeling of pride in what he was doing, as though he himself was doing it, fear very naturally took possession of him, and he began to sink. Faith enabled him to walk on the waves; fear made him sink beneath them.

Says the apostle: "By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they were compassed about seven days" (Heb. 11:30). Why was that written? For our learning, "that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). Why, is there any prospect that we shall ever be called upon to fight armed hosts, and to take fortified cities? No; "for we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph. 6:12); but the victories which have been gained by faith in God over visible foes in the flesh, are placed on record to show us what faith will accomplish in our conflict with the rulers of the darkness of this world. The grace of God, in answer to faith, is as powerful in these battles as in those; for says the apostle:—

"For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh; (for the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:3-5).

It was not physical foes alone that faith enabled the ancient worthies to conquer. We read of them that they not only "subdued kingdoms," but "wrought righteousness, obtained promises," and, most wonderful and most encouraging of all, "out of weakness were made strong" (Heb. 11:33, 34). Their very weakness became strength to them through faith, because the strength of Christ is made perfect in weakness. Who, then, shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? Since it is God that justifieth, and we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" "Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us" (Rom. 8:35, 37).