

FAITH

(Beginning a Series)

There are few words in the Bible which have been subject to greater confusion than the noun "faith" and the verb "believe." In a recent best seller, for example, practically every passage that speaks of faith is explained as referring to a certain feeling of trust or confidence, without any consideration of a sinner's relation to God through the merits of Jesus Christ. There may be a certain degree of merit in such an understanding, but this understanding definitely jeopardizes the fundamental relation of man toward his salvation.

Let us begin, therefore, with the first and primary meaning of the word "faith" as it is absolutely essential for establishing the right relation between the Savior and sinful man, since without faith, rightly understood, it is impossible to please God and to be acceptable to Him.

The Bible gives us a clear and unmistakable explanation of faith, and, first of all, of justifying or saving faith as the essential element in the matter of a man's salvation. As our Savior puts it, very succinctly and bluntly: "He that believeth not shall be damned." Mk. 16:16b. Faith rightly understood, that is, justifying or saving faith, must be a firm belief in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Savior of sinners, of all men. Paul and Silas told the jailer of Philippi, who had addressed the fearful question to them: "What must I do to be saved?" in a very simple and forceful manner: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house." Acts 16:30, 31. Paul told the elders of Ephesus that he had testified both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. Acts 20:31. The writer to the Hebrews states that he belongs to those who believe to the saving of the soul. Hebr. 10:39.

But on what is this faith based? Upon a man's working himself up to a high pitch of excitement, such as

might take hold of soldiers who put great confidence in their leaders? That feeling, in the case of true faith, is only a concomitant factor, a feeling that will usually come after the right relation toward the Savior is established, as we see in Paul's song of triumph in Rom. 8:31-39. The apostle basing his statement on Is. 53:1, offers the conclusion: "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God." Rom. 10:17. When Paul addressed King Agrippa before the tribunal of Festus, he very probably had more than a mere acceptance of the Old Testament as in itself truthful in mind when he said to the king: "Believest thou the phophets? I know that thou believest." Acts 26:27. But there is no mistaking the words of the Savior in the opening call of His ministry: "The kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye and believe the Gospel." Mark 1:15. In all the teaching of the Savior, especially as recorded by John, that one thought occupies a most prominent place, that it is necessary to hear and to accept the Word of the Gospel. Without this Word faith can neither be engendered nor maintained. Luther had good reasons for combatting the claims of the fanatics of his day who depended on direct revelations and inner light to work and sustain faith. And Luther's criticism applies in the same way to all modern fanatics who prate so glowingly of impressions received apart from the Word and therefore so frequently forsake the assembling of themselves in the Lord's house.

We now ask: What is it that gives to the faith of the believers its real value? The answer is briefly given by John, when he states of the matters presented in his Gospel account: "These are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing ye might have life through His name." John 20:31. Every true believer makes the confession of Peter, spoken in the name of the Twelve, his own: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," Matt. 16:16; and again: "Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that Thou art

that Christ, the Son of the living God." John 6:68, 69. Nor was this the mere acceptance of the fact that Jesus Christ is the only-begotten Son of God. It was the same faith as that confessed by Martha, when she said: "I believe that Thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world." John 11:27. Every true believer in Israel had a very clear picture of the Messiah's person and work, namely that the eternal Son of God, as Isaiah 53 describes Him, was, in the stead of all mankind, to bear the sins and the guilt of all and to give His life as a ransom. Justifying or saving faith, therefore, means that the believer appropriates to himself the righteousness wrought by Christ. And "to him who believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness." Rom. 4:5. In scores of passages the New Testament, and especially the Apostle Paul, emphasizes the fact that faith is wrought by the power of the Word, giving the assurance that a man is saved or justified by faith without the deeds of the Law. Rom. 3:28.

In this connection it is essential that we realize wherein the merit of faith consists. Is it a condition of salvation in the sense that a person makes himself acceptable in the sight of God by the act of his faith? Scripture gives us a very clear answer, as, for instance, when the apostle writes: "Ye are risen with Christ through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised Him from the dead." Col. 2:12. Faith is God's operation, God's work in us. It is true indeed that man believes, that he is not a mere automaton, a machine through which God pours the stream of His almighty power to grasp the Gospel truth. Due to the fact that God, in regeneration or conversion, gives to man a new heart, makes him a new man, the faith of the believer is an activity by which he receives and appropriates to himself the merits of Christ. Hence faith is not a meritorious work of which a person may boast, neither in its inception nor in its maintenance, for we "are kept by the power of God

through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." I Pet. 1:5.

And let us by all means always keep in mind that faith is not a mere acceptance, by means of the intellect, of the historical facts pertaining to Christ's work of redemption. No one knows the presentation of the gospels to be the truth better than Satan himself. He knew what went on when the Lord was brought to Calvary; he was fully aware, also, of the meaning of the Lord's cry: "It is finished." True faith must be a living power, and therefore also constantly in action. The apostle writes: "In Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love." Gal. 5:6. Cp. James 2:17. In Eph. 2:10 Paul instructs all believers: "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." Eph. 2:8. It is passages like this, in addition to the Letter to the Romans, which Luther undoubtedly had in mind when he referred to faith as a living, active principle which cannot remain idle, but must constantly be engaged in serving God and the fellow-man, the love of Christ being the constraining power. This thought will be touched upon also in later meditations on the topic of faith.

P. E. K.