

BY FEAR OR BY FAITH  
by Lester J. Start  
Undated

A Sermon by Lester Start

Text: Be not therefore anxious.

The faith of the Christian is frequently likened to a light shining within us. It is the light that lighteth every man. We tend to think of faith, this light, as burning brightly with a steady intensity, unwavering in the vicissitudes of life. Therefore, when we occasionally find the light of faith which burns in our own breast gleaming fitfully, with a flickering light that threatens to go out like a guttering candle, we are likely to become discouraged and conclude resignedly that, alas, our faith is not strong or pure, inadequate to meet the storms of life. And we look with envy upon those heroes of faith, whose light seems always to be burning clearly, and wonder why that same light as darkened in us. The winds of worry and the gales of fear and chill breath of doubt go through us, and the light of faith flickers, waivers. We would believe, but must pray to God to help our unbelief. And too often, we conclude that for some reason, the pure light of faith and power is denied us and we must trust in our own powers.

This, of course, is exactly the conclusion we must avoid. To do this, we must recognize that the pure, unflickering light of faith is a goal impossible of achievement, at least in this life. We must recognize that the wavering light of faith, is the normal, not the exceptional condition of the believer, and that even the greatest heroes of faith knew the experience of a faith threatened by storms of doubt and fear. The reason probably is this. Faith is not simply a matter of doctrine, which appeals to the intellect. Faith is primarily a matter of feeling, which to be sure, include the intellect and will, but relates primarily to our emotions. Because of this it is subject to our moods. ( $2 + 2 = 4$  always true) (God is good - hard to affirm). And so the religious life has its ups and downs - its moments of serenity and triumph, but also its moments of despondency and defeat. Like Christian in Pilgrim's Progress, we walk through a slough of despair to reach the peace of God - we find crosses and thorns as well as crowns.

In dealing with our moods of worry or despair or doubt, let us remember that they are not unusual - they are not a mark of failure of faith, but merely the occasion for faith to reaffirm itself. We could not divide those with faith from those who doubt. It is not so simple. Every believer doubts and fears on occasion for the life of the Spirit is not all sunshine and flowers. And conversely, every doubter must believe on occasion, if only the arguments, which undergird his doubt.

A great deal of comfort and hope can be derived from seeing that our own experience of flickering faith is acknowledged in the Bible. We sometimes think that as soon as we open our Bibles, we are in a world where faith is ever serene, where doubts never assail, nor fears threaten, where people sing in passion, and never feel a pain or sorrow, where virtue always triumphs and wickedness exposed. And yet when we really know the Bible we see that this is not so. There are plenty of passages of faith to be sure, and yet there are cries of another sort:

Jeremiah crying “Why is my pain perpetual, and my wound incurable which refuses to be healed? Wilt thou indeed be unto me as waters that fail?”; Job’s complaint, “Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him; Habakukh “O Lord, how long shall I cry, and Thou wilt not hear? I cry unto Thee of violence and Thou wilt not save!” Surely these are not expressions of a tranquil faith. Nor are these passages unusual. They are not as well-known because they are overlooked as lacking inspiration. But from the day of Gideon, the early Old Testament hero, when he cried like so many today, O my Lord, if God is with us why then is all this befallen us; to the lament of the slain in Revelation, How long O Master dost thou not judge and avenge our blood; the mood of despair, doubt, and fear is frequently expressed (even Jesus had his moments of fainting and fear). The Bible certainly reflects the problems of faith. The Psalmist could sing exultantly, the Lord is my shepherd, but he knew the other mood as well when he writes “my heart is sore pained within me; fearfulness and trembling are come upon me, and horror hath overwhelmed me. And I said, O that I had wings like a dove. Then would I fly away and be at rest”. “Now is my soul troubled and what shall I say?” One can believe in God as one believes in the shining of the sun. But this does not mean that no clouds come into our lives. Sometimes we wonder if the sun will ever shine again - so deep are the clouds, and they endure so long - and similarly we wonder about God.

We must recognize that clouds do come - that moods do appear. But, we believe in the sun and not the clouds (despair, cynicism) (holding the coin to close) We have better houses and worse ones.

It is the mark of irreligion to believe in the worst ones.

It is a mark of faith to believe them the best ones.

We have low moods, cellars in our houses, but we don’t live in them. When we are at our best we believe in goodness eternal. This explains men’s unbelief - illustration of prisoner in the Bastille reproducing his cell in his free house.

“Where your treasure is, there is your heart also”

The affirmation of the best.