

ENDURING FAITH

by Lester J. Start

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Holland Patent, NY

Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

It is a strange paradox that man can do so much that is noble, good, and sublime, and yet can sink so low, all depending upon the vision which he keeps before him. The stage upon which the world performs its history has seen some noble characters, men with a vision into the beyond, who found the inspiration and power to do great things for mankind. But the stage has always found other characters with a different kind of faith who do no good to themselves or others; there is always some Doctor Faustus, who puts his trust in materialistic idols, who has more faith in the powers of evil who serves evil instead of good, Satan instead of God. If man, then, does good or evil according to the faith he holds, let us think for a few moments on the nature of faith to see its power in our lives, and the direction it should take.

I.

In the first verse of the 11th chapter of Hebrews, we find this definition of faith: “now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”. This text is unique in that it is the nearest approach to a definition of an important term that we find anywhere in the Bible. It is important to know, therefore, just what the words mean. Translations vary widely, but the meaning which seems most faithful to the original would read, “faith is the realization (giving substance to) of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”. This definition is not complete; and if it were, it would not be sufficient merely to know the definition. Faith is the gold forged in the crucible of life; experience, not words, give it meaning.

There are some thoughts which arise from the reading of this text that are very significant. First of all, faith realizes. It gives substance to the things we hope for; it undergirds and supports our hopes, making realities of them. It does this through the conviction of the things not seen which the man of faith has. Faith has the power which we call the power of conviction. Through this power faith, in a sense, creates its own facts. If we have fervent faith in God’s power to help us accomplish a task which seemed hopeless, we will find that by this power of conviction, God’s strength becomes visible in our undertaking. This is the great fact about faith which proves its power. It works; it makes the unreal real; it turns a hope into a reality, a vision into a visible fact.

William James illustrates the power of faith in this way: Suppose that you were climbing a mountain, and while climbing you maneuvered yourself into a position on a ledge of a steep cliff. The cliff is too steep to climb either up or down. The only chance for escape is to leap from the ledge over a deep abyss to the top of another cliff nearby. The space to jump is just wide enough to make you wonder whether you can make it. Two alternatives are open to you. Either you can believe you will find the strength to make the leap, have faith you can do it, or you can doubt your chances and ability. But if you have faith, you will be much more likely to save yourself than if you wait and hesitate, doubt and fear, shake and tremble, - and finally jump in a moment

of desperation. James says “There are, then, cases where faith creates its own verification. Believe and you shall be right, for you shall save yourself; doubt, and you shall again be right, for you shall perish. The only difference is that to believe is greatly to your advantage.”

This working of faith is seen everywhere about us; it is the power behind any man, who accomplishes things, for men must have faith in something. In the scientist’s laboratory, on a battlefield, on the street corner, faith of some kind is always behind men urging them on. And its power is seen as it works; faith is the realization of things hoped for, making reality out of a hope.

II.

This is what the power of conviction can do. But faith is more than a feeling of conviction; it makes a great deal of difference, what we have faith in. One must be very careful to see that one has the proper object of faith. There are many kinds of faith depending upon the object. For example, there is the faith in man’s own power, the faith of the humanist, who believes that man is the measure of all things, that he is “the captain of his soul”, sufficient unto himself. There is the faith of the so called religion of science, faith in natural law. There is another type of faith, against which we are fighting today, - faith in power, in the doctrine that might is right, that justice is the interest of the strongest.

These types of faith are different from our idea of true faith, for they emphasize only the act of having faith and ignore the object. Believe, have faith, and the power of conviction will carry you somewhere, but we need the true object of faith if we are to be led in the right direction to the wisdom of God instead of to the folly of false gods.

Faith, as such is not enough; we need faith directed to the true object of faith, which is God. God endowed us with a reason to see His working in the universe, to understand how we should live according to His law. We must make use of this reason; by its light we must see the hand of God at work among us, and put our trust in Him. Let us not to be sidetracked into worshipping false gods, therefore, because their power is fleeting and their light darkness. Let us not put our faith in our own powers, for it is God who gives us the strength to accomplish things in the world. Nor should we stop at natural law, and pin our faith in this, for is not a Creator more than His creation? May we avoid, too, any perversions of faith as worshipping force and worldly power. We cannot form the kingdom of God and failed to consult Him. Faith is a mighty power in life; it demands a mighty object, - it demands God. Faith demands a solid, permanent foundation, something that is the same yesterday, today, and always - it demands God. Faith demands the good, the noble, the enduring, the beautiful in life - it demands God.

You have all seen a cloud in the sunset sky as it moves into the path of the setting sun. At first, it is a dull gray, but when the rays of the sun strike it, it becomes alive and glows with a radiance and glory of color. So our lives become when we put our faith in God. His power enriches our lives and guides us to the beauty, truth and goodness of His creation.

Once an expedition of American scientists was traveling in the Alps looking for some specimens of flowers. As they were searching through that rugged terrain, they came upon a rare flower growing at the bottom of a deep ravine too steep for climbing. As the men stood there pondering how to reach the flower, a little boy came walking by and stood watching them. One of the men, seeing the boy, then suggested they might get their flower by lowering the boy down the ravine with a stout rope they had with them. The boy was light and the rope strong. When they asked the boy to help them, offering to pay him well, too, the little fellow ran off down the path as fast as he could go. The men thought he was too timid and had run away, but soon he came back with a tall strong mountain man. The little boy went up to the men and said gravely, "I have decided to do what you want, and get your flower for you, but-my father will hold the rope".

This, my friends, is what faith can do for you. Hang on to God; put your faith in Him. You will then by your faith partake of the power that can never fail. And you will endure "as seeing him who is invisible".