

BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH

In this book, we have been speaking about the salvation of the soul. We have been investigating God's marvelous plan to create for Himself a bride through whom He can reveal Himself to the world and even the universe. Also, we have been reviewing our responsibility concerning these great truths. As we meditate upon these spiritual things, we must keep one thing firmly in mind. That is that this work of God within us is truly the work of God. None of these wonderful spiritual realities are something which we ourselves can enter into apart from Him. Philippians 2:12,13 reads: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to work on behalf of His good pleasure." You see, although we must be cooperating with Him, it is really He who is doing the work.

Everything which involves God's work in us is a result of His wonderful grace. We believe in Him, because He has had mercy upon us. We grow in Him because of His grace which He supplies to us. We follow Him because of His power which He freely gives us to overcome the obstacles and the enemy. All is a result of His grace. Many define "grace" as being God's unmerited favor. Certainly, this is true. We merit nothing from Him. Yet, because of His great love for us, He came and died for us. He has freely offered us forgiveness. Even more wonderful than forgiveness, He has given us His own eternal life. And even yet more unbelievable but true, He has opened the way for us to grow up into all that He is, becoming "partakers of the divine nature" (II Pet 1:4). This is truly unmerited favor or "grace."

When we arrive before His throne on judgment day, if there is any good thing within us, we will be able to claim no credit for it. There, no flesh will glory in His presence (I Cor 1:29). All the incredible, glorious work which has been done in us will be the result of His grace and mercy. The love of God will have caused Him to patiently work within us to accomplish all of His will. Although we may think of ourselves as being zealous, obedient or consecrated, even this will be shown to be a result of His wonderful grace. This salvation work of God is not based upon our abilities or goodness, but upon His choosing to have mercy upon us. In His presence we will have nothing to be proud of but many things to be thankful for. There we will worship Him forever for having extended to us His loving grace.

The work which the Holy Spirit is doing within us depends upon our faith. We must have faith in Jesus in order to receive Him. We must also continue to walk in faith in order to grow in Him. All spiritual progress is based completely upon our faith. However, even this faith which we have is a result of God's wonderful grace. It too is not of ourselves, it "is the gift of God" (Eph 2:8).

Perhaps a good way to understand this is to take a look at the experience of the

father of faith—Abraham. By examining just how he arrived at faith perhaps we can discover how God imparts faith to us. The scripture reads: “the word of the Lord came unto Abram in a vision” (Gen 15:1). Then it says, “And he (Abram) believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness” (Gen 15:6). The order in which these two events took place is very significant. First God supernaturally manifested His will and His glory to Abraham. Then Abraham believed. His response to this heavenly vision was faith. He reacted to this divine revelation by believing that God existed and that what He said was true.

Please notice on the other hand how his faith did not happen. It was not a result of his self-effort or mental concentration. Abraham was not walking in the desert one starry night looking into the heavens and suddenly thought, “There must be a God. By golly, I think there really is God. Why, I believe, I believe there is God and He surely must want me to have many descendants.” And God did not upon hearing these “words of faith” come rushing down and reveal Himself to Abraham. No, Abraham's faith came in exactly the opposite way. First God revealed Himself and then Abraham believed. It was this kind of faith that pleased God and caused Him to label Abraham as righteous.

What a wonderful event that must have been when God first showed Himself to Abraham. Do you still remember the time when God was first revealed to you? If you are a Christian today it is because at some time and in some way God manifested Himself and your response to this was faith. You may have said something like, “God is real. I’ve seen Him. He has shown Himself to me and now I believe in Him.” Unless you have come to know the one true God personally through the revelation of Jesus Christ, you cannot be a real Christian.

Let's continue here with a brief definition of faith. “Faith is the human response to divine revelation.” Once God shows us something of Himself then we can believe. But unless He chooses to reveal Himself to us nothing we can do or think will qualify as real faith. Unless we have “seen” Him in some measure we cannot believe in Him. We can perhaps give our mental assent to something we have read or heard about God but this is not what the Bible calls “faith.” James tells us that even the demons have a kind of belief in God. They believe and tremble (Jas 2:19). But saving faith—genuine faith—the kind of faith that justifies before God those who possess it, is faith which results from God’s revealing Himself.

Unfortunately, not every man’s reaction to divine revelation is faith. Many people we read about in the Bible reacted to the manifestation of God’s power and divinity with unbelief. Most of us probably imagine that if God would speak audibly from heaven everyone would surely believe. Nevertheless this is not the case. Several times in the gospels it is recorded that God did just that. One time Jesus was praying to the Father and said, “Father, glorify Thy name.” In response to this a voice came out from heaven saying, “I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again” (Jn 12:28). Even though the entire crowd heard the voice of God, not all believed. Some of them said, “Surely it must have thundered.” Their reaction was one of complete unbelief. They had heard God audibly yet they chose not to believe in the reality of what had just happened. Still another striking instance of such unbelief is seen when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. After this event, we are told that many of His disciples believed on Him. But there were some among the crowd who, even though they had seen the dead raised, did not believe. Instead their hearts were hardened.

True faith occurs when the human heart responds positively to God. When God through His mercy reveals Himself to us in some way, we are then in a position to

choose whether or not to believe. When we choose faith, this brings us into a relationship with God. He responds to our faith response. The result of our belief is intimacy with God. We are then born again. We then receive His Holy Spirit within us. This, however, is not the end. Instead, it is the beginning of a life-long relationship of intimacy with Him.

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

One of the main tenets of the modern Evangelical church is justification by faith. This means that we are justified before God because of our faith in Him. By this we are intending to say that God is entering into a relationship with us and is having intimate communion with us, not because of some works which we have done to please Him, but because we believe in the revelation of His Son. Our faith is in Jesus who has shown Himself to us and this is the basis of our relationship with God. Our God, as a result of our faith, interacts with us in an intimate, personal way as if we were completely righteous. As a result of our faith, He “imputes” a righteousness to us (Rm 4:22-24). This is an act of grace, nothing less. We do not deserve to be thought of as righteous, but through God’s grace, He enters into a relationship with us as if we were really without sin.

However, we must be very clear about one thing. This faith about which we speak—this faith which justifies us today in the eyes of God—is a living faith. It is not merely the fact that we believed in Jesus, let us say, 20 years ago. It is a faith which is active now. At this moment, we are responding in faith to what our Lord is revealing to us. We are hearing His voice. We are believing His living word and we are obeying Him. This is the kind of faith which justifies us. Far too many Christians are simply hoping that because they believed in Jesus sometime in the past, or because they have agreed with some biblical fact, from then on, God considers them righteous. However, this is not true. In order to be considered righteous by God today, we must have a living, daily, active faith.

Our brother James wrote trying to bring correction to a false impression which was already prevalent in his day. That was that a kind of mental, static “faith” was enough. Perhaps there were some in the church of his day also who supposed that since they had believed “at one time” or “in something,” they were thereby justified. But James argues against this. He asserted strongly and repeatedly that “faith without works is dead” (Js 2:17,20,26). He states that we are justified “by our works” (Js 2:24). By this he was insisting that our faith should be producing something. It should be being manifested daily in our lives in real, tangible results. It should be revealed through our present, living relationship with God. If it is not, it is a dead faith by which we cannot be and are not being justified. These “works” of which he speaks are not merely good deeds, but are the evidence of the submission of our entire life to Christ. They are the visible manifestation of a living faith and daily communion with God.

James is not contradicting Paul by insisting upon “works.” He was not negating the necessity of faith. In no way is he refuting “justification by faith.” His objective was to clarify for us exactly what kind of faith is required to justify us before God. He was only insisting that our faith must be a living faith. We must be maintaining an intimacy with Jesus. We must have an up-to-date faith relationship with Him. The proof of this living faith is in the fruit which is visible right now. It is only this kind of faith which is justifying us. James shows that it is by “faith working together with . . . works” that our faith is “made perfect” (Js 2:22).

Jesus has opened the way for us. He is freely justifying the ungodly through faith (Gal 3:8). His grace is abundantly available. Yet, how many of God's own children today are living in a state of unbelief. In spite of the fact that they once believed, they have turned away. They once walked in intimacy and communion with Him, but today this is no longer their experience. He is speaking to them, but they refuse to hear. He is revealing Himself, but they deny what He is revealing to them. He is correcting them but they do not recognize His hand. For some reason, they do not want to hear what He is saying and so they invent excuses. "That couldn't be God," they reason. "He wouldn't want anything like that from me." Thus, they deny Him. They refuse His speaking and so deny His authority in their lives. When this occurs, the work of salvation in their lives becomes stalled. Their intimate communion with God is broken. These are no longer "walking by faith" and so are no longer being justified. Only when they finally repent and choose to hear His voice can He continue His work of grace in them.

FAITH AND OBEDIENCE

Once again the experience of the children of Israel in the wilderness becomes an important example for us. They had been travelling for months through the desert. It had been a long, hot journey. Finally, they came within sight of their objective, the promised land. Before crossing the Jordan, Moses sent out twelve men to enter into the land and spy it out. They were to bring a report of what they found there. For ten of the twelve men, their experience in Canaan was terrifying. They saw giants there. The cities were fortified and strong. And so they persuaded the people to rebel against the will of their God. These men did not have faith. They did not believe that God would give His servants the power to accomplish what He had commanded them to do. So their lack of faith resulted in disobedience.

This is exactly the way it is with some believers today. They are the children of God. They have received Jesus by faith. They have been baptized, corresponding to the children of Israel crossing the Red Sea (I Cor 10:2). Yet for some reason, they have stopped believing in a living way. They are no longer walking in intimacy with God. Somehow, they have encountered something in the spiritual walk which frightens them. Possibly, they have come up against some challenge in their life which they believe to be too strongly fortified to overcome. Perhaps Jesus has asked something of them which they are unprepared and unwilling to do. So, they have shut their ears and stopped hearing His voice. They have ceased to respond in faith to His revelation and leadership. Their once intimate communion with Jesus has faded into a bittersweet memory.

When we are living by faith, we are also living in obedience to God. These things go hand in hand. It is impossible to have a living faith relationship with Jesus and be disobedient. When we are not obeying our Lord, we cannot be walking in faith. Our refusal to hear Jesus and do what He says is to live in rebellion. This is a lack of faith. When God leads us in some direction, we must believe that it is the best thing for us. When He directs us into some area of life which we find frightening, we must have faith that He knows what He is doing and will be with us. When we are confronted with difficult situations, even impossible ones, we must choose to believe that He is able to defeat the enemy through us. Only in this way can we walk in a faith which justifies us before God.

THE JUDGMENT OF GOD

When we are living in disobedience, we are living in sin. Romans 14:23 states that: "whatsoever is not from faith is sin." Clearly, if we are not obeying it is because we are not believing. Therefore, since we are not walking in faith, we are not being justified. God is not considering us righteous. Our lack of faith, rather than making us right with God, is causing Him to be displeased with us. Hebrews 3:13-17 speaks of those who left Egypt but failed to enter in and possess the Land of Promise because of their lack of faith. They were "hardened through the deceitfulness of sin" Consequently, their carcasses "fell in the wilderness." These things speak to us today.

As we have seen in previous chapters, there are real consequences for our choices today. If we do not continue on in faith, day by day following and obeying Jesus, then we are no longer pleasing to God. We are no longer in a position where we can experience His grace. His displeasure rather than His favor rests upon us. Therefore, unless we repent and turn back to Him and become willing to do His will, we will suffer the consequences which His word reveals. As we have seen before, one of the most serious consequences is that the untransformed part of our soul will be lost (Mt 16:25, Mt 10:39, Lk 9:24, 17:33, Jn 12:25). Our "corpses" will fall in the wilderness. We will suffer great, irrecoverable loss. His judgment upon disobedient children will be carried out. If we turn back from following Him in unbelief, then we cannot experience the blessings of faith, but only the consequences of disobedience. These are those "whose end is to be burned" by God's holy presence (Heb 6:8).

Hebrews 3:13,14 urges us to: "exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end." Certainly this was written to believers. Therefore, this word "if" here is extremely important to us. We must continue on in a living faith relationship with Jesus, if we want to receive His favorable rewards. Becoming "partakers of Christ" here must be understood as being partakers of the fulness of Christ since all true Christians have received Him already.

FAITH IS NOT HUMAN HOPE

Many people today, misunderstanding faith, have attempted to make it into a human kind of hope. They mistakenly imagine that if they simply read the Bible, choose passages which please them and give their mental assent to the truths expressed in them, this then qualifies as being faith. Unfortunately, this is only a soulish exercise which can never help us. No amount of continual restatement of scriptural truths will lead us to genuine faith. Only the supernatural revelation of God can accomplish this. The scriptures read, "and [Jesus] manifested forth His glory; and His disciples believed on Him" (Jn 2:11). Once Jesus reveals Himself and His will to us, then we can choose to believe. This is the kind of faith that the Bible is talking about.

Unfortunately human beings are often blinded to spiritual things by worldly definitions. Just because we have grown up thinking we knew what faith was—that is, giving our mental assent to some idea—we imagine that this same definition will be good enough to use in our Christianity. Sadly this kind of mental activity will never work. It merely generates a human kind of hope. Only those who have seen God and responded in faith to Him believe in a way that will cause them to be accounted righteous and enable them to receive what He wants to give them. Our faith, that is our

response to God's revelation, enables us to enter into what God is showing us.

Many Christians are trying to "believe" that they have something when in fact they do not. For example, they assert that they "have the mind of Christ," but it is evident from their lives that their thoughts are not dominated by Him. Their words and actions manifestly show that they do not have the Holy Spirit liberating them from the programming of the world and the devil. Their minds are not filled with Jesus' thoughts and opinions. Perhaps these same individuals also believe that they are already completely saved, sanctified and purified. But here too, their lives make a lie out of this "faith" of theirs. Citing Bible verses they think that they possess something which, obviously, they do not. Theirs is not a living faith.

UNREALITY IN THE CHURCH

Certainly, God has freely given us "all things" (Rm 8:32). He has opened the way for us to enter into all that He is. But the sad fact is that many are not entering. They are only imagining that they have entered. They are only hearing about these great truths, giving their mental assent to them and hoping that somehow this will make it true for them. This kind of thinking fills the Christians of our day and the church of our time with a very strong, palpable sense of unreality. Far too many are speaking, praying, preaching and worshipping about things which are not real to them. Even though these things are true in an eternal sense, they are not real in their lives.

A famous actor once said: "The difference between preachers and actors is this: Preachers speak about things which are true as though they were not true and actors speak about things which are not true as if they were true." What a terrible indictment! What is it about our modern Christianity which produces this kind of unreality which even unbelievers notice? Why is our "belief" not producing results? Why are these precious things not real in our daily lives? There are two main factors which seem to be contributing to this problem:

Firstly, the devil has succeed in obscuring the truth of God. He, through his lies and half truths, has been cheating the children of God out of their inheritance. A large part of his lie is what we have been addressing. That is the belief that we already have these precious, spiritual things of God, even though we don't. He has propagated this error through a mis-definition of faith and grace. Thus he has deluded Christians into thinking that they do not need to experience these things here and now and that true righteousness only exists in the mind of God. Satan has made the gospel into a kind of fairy tale, which is only true in the imaginary world.

This is exactly what Paul warns us about. He predicts that in the last days people will "be turned aside to fables" or fairy tales, rather than the truth (II Tim 4:4). And what is this "fable?" It is something only imaginary. It is the thought that all the promises of God are for tomorrow—a kind of pleasure land in the sky when we die. It is the belief that righteousness and other saintly virtues only exist in the mind of God. It is the attitude that God sees only Jesus and not the way we really are. It is the thought that our rewards are future and physical and have little or nothing to do with our experience today. It is the impression that there will be no negative consequences for disobedience for the children of God. These are the lies of the enemy. It is a great darkness which hangs heavily over the church of our day. "If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness" (Mt 6:23)!

The result of believing these lies is that we are not motivated to press into Christ

and take possession of all that He is. Thinking that we have already received everything we do not look to experience more. Believing that our “reward” has very little relationship to how we live today, we cease to be concerned about the true condition of our soul. The fear of God is gone. For many, Christianity only consists of trying to avoid obvious sins which might offend others, then continually trying to assure one another that everything is O.K. when manifestly it is not.

This is what it means to “receive the grace of God in vain” (II Cor 6:1). Even though all good things are being offered to us, we are not taking possession of them. Even though our Lord has done everything for us, we are not allowing Him to do His work in us. God in His great goodness is not judging our attitudes and actions today. But it is clear that this goodness of God should “lead to repentance” (Rm 2:4). It should cause us to open up our lives to Him and let Him do His will. The fact that He has given Himself for us should stimulate us to give ourselves completely to Him. If we do not experience for ourselves all the wonderful things that God has freely offered to us, we are abusing His goodness. When we do not respond to the grace being offered to us, we have “insulted Spirit of grace” (Heb 10:29). When the truth of God does not stimulate us to open up our lives and let Him do His work within us we “fall short of the grace of God” (Heb 12:15). The lies of the enemy and our own stubbornness keep us from what should be rightfully ours.

Secondly, an important factor which contributes to our lack of spiritual progress today is our unwillingness to die. As we have seen in chapter 5, an important part of God’s work within us is to put to death the old life and nature. In order to follow Jesus, we must be willing to “take up our cross” (Mt 16:24), or in other words, we must be ready to die. This of course is not what the flesh wants to hear. It is a point at which many stumble and fall. Many love to hear and drink the “milk of the word” but solid food is not agreeable to them. The “preaching of the cross” is indeed solid food. It is not easy to digest. The wonderful, almost unimaginable things which Jesus Christ is offering to us are exciting. But there is a price to pay. Even though it is all free, even though Jesus already paid the highest price for us, yet there is still a cost in human terms. In order to take possession of all that God is offering, we must lose our own life (PSUCHE) (Mt 16:25). In order for Him to live through us, we must die.

No doubt this is one reason why so few of God’s children seem to be entering in and taking possession of the things of Christ. The cost to themselves is too high. Perhaps they never have been told the whole story. Possibly the “whole counsel of God” has never reached their ears. (Acts 20:27). Consequently, they never sat down to “count the cost” (Lk 14:28). The unfortunate result is that they are resisting the efforts of the Spirit to try to bring them on to maturity. Not being ready to experience the death of Christ working in them, they refuse the grace of God which would save them from what they are. Any unwillingness on our part brings an immediate halt to our spiritual progress. As we have seen before, our Lord will never violate our will. So, when we become unwilling for the cross to operate in our lives, when we love what and who we are more than Christ, or when we do not have the willingness to step out in the faith which Jesus is giving us, then our spiritual progress stops.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

We have been speaking in this chapter about imputed righteousness. This is the fact that, because of our faith, God is interacting with us as if we were indeed righteous. However, there is another “righteousness” revealed in the New Testament. This

righteousness too is a result of our faith. This is the righteousness of God (Philip 3:9). Our God is forgiving our sins, overlooking our faults and entering into a relationship with us for a purpose. He is treating us as though we were righteous so that we can actually become righteous. Our faith brings us into an intimacy with God which is intended to change us. This relationship, which involves receiving the actual life of God with His divine nature, is meant to alter our being at the most fundamental level. This change is a result of our living faith. It is something which begins to reveal itself in our character. Through this faith of ours, God begins to transform our soul, exchanging His life for ours, and so begins to reveal Himself through us. Thus we begin to exhibit His righteousness.

This righteousness is “not of [y]ourselves, it is the gift of God” (Eph 2:8). Yet, even though the origin of it is not us, it has its expression through us. The source is God, but the manifestation is through human beings. This kind of righteousness does not exist only in the mind of God. It is something visible, right here on earth. It is not a result of self-effort, but a product of our daily faith.

You see, our faith, which is the source of our relationship with God, causes us to obey Him. It impels us to open up our being to Him. It results in our allowing Him to dominate and predominate within us. This is how we fulfill His will. If our faith is real, then it will produce results. When our faith is living, a genuine righteousness is exhibited in us. The “peaceable fruit of righteousness” (Heb 12:11) is a tangible thing which God is seeking to establish within us. If we are not exhibiting this fruit, then it is a sign that our faith is not active. Only a daily, living faith, producing intimacy with God, really changes us.

Dear brothers and sisters, how we need to be walking by faith today. Without faith, it is impossible to please God (Heb 11:6). He has done everything for us. His grace is abundantly available to all. Even more faith is available from Him if we are ready and willing to receive it. Our part is only to respond to Him. What is required of us is simply to submit our lives completely to His authority, receive what He is offering and allow Him to do His complete work. In this way, God’s grace working through our faith will accomplish His will in our lives and we will receive the benefits of the completed work of Christ.