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W. F. Beck

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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The Growth of Our Faith

By W. F. BECK

This is the second in a series of three studies on "Faith." The third study is scheduled for early publication.

WEAK FAITH IS FAITH

CONTRAST a righteous but weak Lot with Abraham, the father of all believers. Lot is materialistic, timid, helpless; Abraham is unselfish, bold, royal. Lot has to run for his life; Abraham, alone, pleads with God for Sodom. Lot escapes from the burning city with the loss of everything, while Abraham lives peacefully with the Lord who made heaven and earth. Lot wants to hide in a cave, while Abraham rises like a lonely mountain peak, touching the clouds.

But we see from the life of Abraham, and from David and Peter, that even great men of faith can be weak. You may be strong in the morning and weak in the evening. You may feel strong and be weak. "If you think you can stand, be careful, or you may fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).^{*} You may feel weak and yet be strong. "When you are weak, My power does its best work" (2 Cor. 12:9). The reason for the paradox is that our personal feelings are not sufficiently correlated with the degrees of spiritual strength to measure them.

Faith is tested by trouble. People with little faith are often in desperate situations, just as businessmen with little capital find the economic restraints particularly troublesome. In the "pinch" our faith may look small. With a hungry crowd before them, the disciples ask, "Where do we get bread?" In a ship, covered with waves, they cry, "Lord, we perish!" At the prospect of the Crucifixion all of them run away.

Little faith is a bruised reed: Nothing is more frail or dependent on circumstances; a wind may break it. It is a flickering wick or a spark in the ashes. It may easily go out. It is the needle of a compass: The heart points to Christ, but it trembles unsteadily

^{*} The Biblical quotations are from the author's own version of the New Testament, a project on which he has been engaged for many years.

and is easily disturbed. It is a baby bird just off its nest: Its flights are short, and it frequently must rest.

Yet weak faith is faith, as different from unbelief as heaven is from hell. It may not be strong, but it is genuine. The little child who has just begun to believe and Abraham have the same kind of faith. The thief on the cross is on a level with the greatest Apostle. If you accept Jesus ever so hesitantly, you are as much a child of God as the Christian hero who challenges all the giants along the road.

Some comforting illustrations: The two-week-old infant in its mother's arms is her child as much as her adult son who is a successful businessman. You are an American, whether you are healthy or sick, rich or poor. A child has a sore finger, but it would never trade it for a golden one. A drop of water is as certainly water as the whole ocean. A diamond is a diamond whatever its size; a pearl is a pearl, though it be as small as a pinhead. A spark, glowing unseen in the ashes, is fire as well as the flames of a burning Rome. A seed in the ground has life as surely as the tall tree with spreading branches.

For it is God who gives the smallest particle of faith, just as He alone can make a mustard seed. Even the faith which cries, "Help my unbelief," is a creation of the most high God. If there is a ray of light, it came from the sun; if there is a pulse beat in your finger tip, it came from the heart; if you believe ever so little, it is the work of the Spirit.

That is why God will not hurt weak faith. In ancient times the shepherd played on a "reed" (Is. 42:3). But when it was bruised, it wasn't mended. He would snap the old reed, throw it away, and get a new one. But when the music has gone out of a man's soul, God does not throw him away.

A bending staff I would not break;

A feeble faith I would not shake.—*Whittier*.

When the wick gives only unpleasant smoke, He will not quench it. Spurgeon says, "You know there were snuffers and snuff trays provided in the Temple . . . but no extinguishers."

The Lord accepts weak faith. Even when He scolds it, He does so, not to reject it, but to stimulate it. He looks up to the timid

little man in the sycamore, meets his longing, and brings salvation to his home. He will reach you and bring healing to you as long as you are by faith in contact with Him; the wire may shake with the wind and yet carry a current of power. A child's weak hand, bringing the spoon to the mouth, will do as well as a man's hand; it is not the hand that nourishes, but the food. It is not the size or strength of faith that saves, but the blood of Jesus. Moody said: "Someone has said that a little fly in Noah's ark was just as safe as an elephant. It was not the elephant's size and strength that made him safe. It was the ark that saved both the elephant and the fly."

GOD STRENGTHENS OUR FAITH

We should not be satisfied with a weak and timid faith, but strive to be vigorous, useful, and victorious. If we are satisfied to believe only a little, pray and work a little, give a little, the little may become less until Christian faith withers away (Luke 8:18; 19:26). At one time touching the tassel of His garment may have been enough, but shouldn't we want to get beyond that? Jesus stirred people with some sharp rebukes: "O you unbelieving people! How long must I be with you!" (Mark 9:19.) He said to a drowning Peter: "How little you trust Me! Why did you doubt?" (Matt. 14:31.) We should count weakness of faith among our sins. God has a right to expect a stronger faith. A "reed" could be used for music, for measuring, or for a staff. But what was it good for when it was bruised? What is a smoking wick good for? It will not show the way in the dark, and you cannot read a book by it.

The Bible praises strong faith. "Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5). "Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great signs and wonders among the people" (v. 8). Barnabas "was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith" (Acts 11:24). Paul tells the Thessalonians (2 Thess. 1:3): "We always have to thank God for you, my fellow Christians. It is right for us to do so because your faith is growing so much" (cp. 2 Cor. 8:7; Col. 2:5).

We should see the potentialities of weak faith. A little red coal touches some dry grass; a breeze fans it, and the whole area may be

in flames. A poor, weak man may someday do great things. Don't feel disappointed with Peter drowning and terrified; see him a little later, pulled out of the water, standing side by side with his Lord: the servant equipped with the might of his Master.

Faith is a gift of God in its growth as well as in its beginning. If it is a seed, God gave it; if it is a tree, God gave it. He is the A and the Z of faith. We look to Him for growth. "I will not break it," He says; more than that, He will water it, watch it, shelter it against the storm, and make it grow and produce fruit.

God wants us to strengthen one another. So we deal patiently with a weak Christian (Rom. 15:1) and even give up our liberties for him (14:20-21; 1 Cor. 9:22). Our words make a greater impact if we have seen trouble ourselves, if the strength of God which we bring has come through many a conflict. Before Peter had denied Him, Jesus told Peter: "When you come back, strengthen your fellow disciples" (Luke 22:32). Paul and Barnabas "strengthened the disciples and encouraged them to stay in the faith, saying: 'We must suffer much to go into the Kingdom of God'" (Acts 14:22). Paul, a prisoner, writes to the Philippians (1:25): "I know I will live and be with you to help you grow and be happy in your faith."

From early childhood, when mature matters are not understood, and throughout life the content of faith varies. Our knowledge can decrease as well as grow. We shall, of course, never fully grasp God's truth. "To know how Christ loves us . . . is really more than we can know" (Eph. 3:19). But we shouldn't always be drinking milk. The writer to the Hebrews (5:12) reproves them, saying: "At a time when you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the ABC of the Word of God again; you need to be fed milk again instead of solid food."

When we have too little of the truth, it is easier to lose it. "In others it falls on a rock; as soon as they hear the Word, they welcome it with joy, but it does not take root in them; they believe for a while, but when they are tempted, they fall away" (Luke 8:13). Christians whose knowledge is meager will more easily turn to error. "Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have lost the truth . . . upset the faith of simple people" (2 Tim. 2:17-18). "Be

careful, or someone will carry you away captive by his philosophy, tricking you with meaningless words as he follows the traditions of men and the crude ways of the world and does not follow Christ" (Col. 2:8). If faith is short-lived, it may be due to lack of thorough instruction.

Sometimes the central impact of his salvation forcefully grips the whole being of a man and makes him mighty although he has no breadth of doctrinal understanding and may err in regard to a number of truths because of lack of knowledge. But, speaking generally, the limits of knowledge will be the limits of faith. An area of ignorance will be an area of doubt, and an area of knowledge will in most cases be an area of faith.

So we strive to enlarge the areas of knowledge. We put fuel on the fire to make it burn and oil into the lamp to make it shine. We provide a rich supply directly to the Savior's regular followers, and indirectly handfuls on purpose for the gleaners. It is this nourishment in the Word which gives strength to faith. "This Book of the Law should not depart from your mouth, but you should meditate in it day and night in order that you may follow and do all that is written in it; for then you will prosper in what you do, and you will succeed" (Joshua 1:8). "After He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this, and they believed the Bible and what Jesus had said" (John 2:22). Paul praises "Him who can make you strong by the Good News that I bring and the preaching of Jesus Christ" (Rom. 16:25; cp. Eph. 2:20; Col. 2:2, 5). "But he in whom the Word is sown in good ground is he who understands it, and he bears fruit, one a hundredfold, another sixtyfold, and another thirtyfold" (Matt. 13:23).

This involves making the right inferences from the historical facts of Jesus. "Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; or else believe Me on account of what I do" (John 14:11-12). "As we believe that Jesus died and rose, so we believe that God will through Jesus bring with Him those who went to their rest" (1 Thess. 4:14).

Faith grows with clearer distinctions. Paul spoke of a person who was uncertain about eating certain meats as weak in faith. "Welcome a man who is weak in faith, without quarreling about

his doubts. While one believes he can eat anything, the weak Christian eats only vegetables." (Rom. 14:1-2.) The Apostles sent a letter to the churches to help them decide what regulations of Moses they ought to keep, what foods they might eat, and what sins they needed to shun with special care. As Paul, Silas, and Timothy "went through the towns, they delivered the decisions that the Apostles and elders in Jerusalem had made and that people were to keep. So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and the number of the Christians grew larger every day." (Acts 16:4-5.) "Don't despise the Word of God when anyone speaks it, but test everything, and cling to what is good" (1 Thess. 5:20-21; cp. 2 Tim. 2:15).

Such knowledge disposes of error. Jesus told those who were puzzling about the woman that had married seven brothers: "You are wrong because you do not know the Bible or the power of God" (Matt. 22:29). We need sound information to distinguish truth from falsehood: "Dear friends, don't believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they have come from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1; cp. Matt. 24:23, 26; Mark 13:21-22). As our knowledge grows and our vision becomes clearer, error will disappear. Many doubts about God's ways also will vanish when we know Him better.

We doubt when our experiences weigh too heavily with us. Adults are more inclined to doubt, because they have spent more years in the school of life. Zacharias had no earthly reason to expect a son at his age. A similar wider experience is the background for the special skepticism and apathy of men of learning.

We doubt when we demand sensory proof. Jacob would not believe that Joseph was alive until he saw the Egyptian wagons; Thomas would not believe until he saw the wounds on Jesus. We, too, crave the touch of something like those wounds before we'll give up our gloomy vision of the grave; we would like to leap the chasm between us and heaven to see the recreated bodies of God's people before we'll feel confident that our sickly bodies will live again in glory.

We doubt when we want our own way. Naaman wanted Elisha at least to move his hand over the leprous spots of his body (2 Kings 5:11). The idea of washing in the Jordan seemed ridicu-

lous; he didn't need a prophet to do that. Couldn't the prophet honor him with some ceremony?

We invite doubt when we stray over the line of conversion to the fleshly side of life and do as we please. Here, where the flesh lusts against the spirit, we find our most dangerous enemies. If we have a pet sin (Ps. 66:18), we must listen closely to a divinely guided conscience. "Some people have refused to listen to their conscience and have suffered shipwreck in their faith" (1 Tim. 1:19). Doubts may be due to worry, concern for comfort, the love of pleasure, the striving for wealth. The fascination of earthly treasures may make us less attached to those of heaven. "If anyone loves the world, he does not love the Father" (1 John 2:15; cp. 2 Tim. 4:10). "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be" (Luke 12:34). "Some people, eager to get rich, have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows" (1 Tim. 6:10). "Didn't God choose those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith?" (James 2:5.) It is dangers like these which will destroy many, perhaps within sight of the harbor. The warning question must flash before our mind: "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8.)

We stumble worst of all when we trust in our good life and our efforts, by which we can never stand before an angry God. Sometimes prospects are urged to pray and struggle to change themselves into better people and so to move God to accept them. That is the inverted order: first improvement, then salvation. If we want to do better first, we do not trust Christ; and failing to realize the hope He gives, we nourish doubt and despair. Luther pointed out that if our salvation depended on just one Lord's Prayer, it would be doubtful, because our praying might not have the right quality. God is not pleased with us if, hesitating to accept His free offer, we labor to make ourselves acceptable. There should be a sharp rejection of any preparatory activities. Luther: "This is the reason why our theology is certain: It snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, in order that we may not depend on men, conscience, feelings, character, our own work" (WA 40, 1, p. 589).

All doubts are due to a failure to concentrate on the object of

our faith. There is nothing doubtful about that object; and we dare not feel discouraged unless we have a reason. God has done nothing to create a suspicion of His love, of His truth, or of His power; He has done everything to make us trust Him. His love is the greatest thing in the world, and it gives us every confidence. "Where there was much sin, there was much more love of God" (Rom. 5:20). He chose the surest way when He canceled the world's sin (2 Cor. 5:19); you could not be more certain if your name were mentioned, since there might be some doubt about your name. He has given us His Son as the concrete Center of our conviction. If you want faith, look to Jesus. We hold broken keys in our hands, but our Savior has the key to security and happiness: He opens, and no man shuts; He shuts, and no man opens. "Let us come near God, sincere in our hearts and convinced in our faith, because the sprinkling of our hearts has taken away our guilty feelings" (Heb. 10:22). Righteousness and heaven are ours as certainly as if each of us were the Son of God. "Those who are in Christ can in no way be condemned" (Rom. 8:1). "If our hearts do not condemn us, we can speak boldly to God" (1 John 3:21). "In Him, by believing in Him, we have confidence and can come to God" (Eph. 3:12). With Him there is no need to fear. That is why He Himself could sleep when the waves were splashing over the boat, and He could say to His frightened disciples: "Why are you afraid? You trust Me so little!" (Matt. 8:23-27; cp. Luke 8:50.) His resurrection is a special source of certainty. God "by raising Him from the dead has given everyone a good reason to believe in Him" (Acts 17:31). When Nathanael had his doubts, Philip told him, "Come and see"; and so Nathanael was convinced (John 1:45-59). The Samaritans told the woman: "We no longer believe on account of your words, because we have heard Him ourselves, and we know that He certainly is the Savior of the world" (John 4:42; cp. 6:69; Acts 15:11). Jesus lives within us to give us certainty. "Examine yourselves to see whether you believe; test yourselves. Do you not know that Jesus Christ is in you?" (2 Cor. 13:5; cp. John 6:50-58.) "No one who believes in Him, the Bible says, will be disappointed" (Rom. 10:11).

He who gave His life that we might believe in Him will keep us in faith. Of the lambs of Jesse's flock David will have loved that

one best and carried it at his bosom for which he risked his life when he rescued it from the lion's jaws. Jesus paid too great a price for His jewels to let anyone steal them or to let any one of them be missing on that Day. If He came from heaven to die for us when we hated Him, can He leave us to perish now that we love Him? (Rom. 5:8-10.) Luther boldly exclaimed, "Let Him that died for my soul see to the salvation of it." He does love us to the end (John 13:1). He sees to it that the first justification of the believing sinner becomes the continuing justification of the sinning believer. What He does is beyond recall (Rom. 11:29). As He holds us in His hands, He says, "They will never be lost, and no one will tear them out of My hand" (John 10:28). "What would you think if, after all, you were to slip out of the hand of Christ?" someone asked. "Oh, I cannot," the woman answered, "I am His hand." That is true: "Don't you know that your bodies are members of Christ?" (1 Cor. 6:15.) "Everyone who believes in Him should not perish" (John 3:16).

There is a special comfort and strength which only a believer can understand and value. I should tell myself: From eternity I have been chosen for this. My salvation does not depend on my weak faith and my sin, which may destroy me, but on the will of the Almighty, who makes my faith an everlasting certainty. It is included in God's eternal choice and so must continue forever. (Rom. 8:29-30.)

In Christ our faith comes to rest "on the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:5; cp. vv. 1-4; 2 Cor. 12:9) and "in God" (1 Peter 1:21). "Such is the confidence we have in God through Christ" (2 Cor. 3:4). "If God is for us, who will be against us? He did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for all of us — can it be that He will not with Him give us everything?" (Rom. 8:31-32.) "You can depend on God that He will not let you be tempted more than you can stand, but when you are tempted, He will also give you a way to escape so that you can bear it" (1 Cor. 10:13). He doesn't merely start you on your way and then leave you to yourself, like a half-built house, abandoned by an architect who got interested in other things. "He will strengthen you until the end" (1 Cor. 1:8; cp. Acts 20:32; 1 Peter 1:5). "I am sure that He who began the good work in you will go on to perfect it for the day of Christ

Jesus" (Phil. 1:6; cp. 2 Tim. 1:12). He will protect you in all dangers. "You can depend on the Lord: He will strengthen you and protect you against the Evil One" (2 Thess. 3:3; cp. 1 Thess. 5:24). "In all this He who loved us helps us to win an overwhelming victory. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor their rulers, neither anything now nor in the future, no powers, nothing above or below, nor any other creature, can ever separate us from God, who loves us in Christ Jesus, our Lord." (Rom. 8:37-39.)

All supports of our faith would break down if we had not heard from heaven. But God has rent the heavens and come down. The unbelieving Jews realized that if heaven sent John, they should have believed in him (Matt. 21:25, 32). God has spoken in His Word, in our Baptism and in the Lord's Supper, and has given us His pledges. If we forget how God keeps His promises, if we ignore the kindnesses that have come to us by His covenant, our faith will turn pale before our hair turns white. So we cling to His promises. Abraham "realized there was no more life in his body (he was about a hundred years old) and that Sarah could have no children any more; yet he was not weak in faith. No unbelief made him doubt what God had promised; his faith was strengthened." (Rom. 4:19-20; cp. Matt. 15:21-28.) This Word has Christ, the Truth, at its center (John 5:46; 20:31; Acts 28:23). In this Word the Spirit testifies to us (Rom. 8:16; 1 Cor. 2:5, 10-13; Eph. 4:30; 1 John 4:13). Luther: "Here the Holy Spirit must overrule us, write such knowledge and faith into our hearts and testify to our spirits that it is certain and Amen that by believing in Christ we have become and will always be God's children." Jesus says, "Your Word is truth" (John 17:17). If we do not believe God, we make Him a liar (1 John 5:9-10). That is why Jesus criticizes His disciples: "How foolish you are and how slow to believe all the Prophets have said" (Luke 24:25). "Believe the Good News" (Mark 1:15). "If you continue in My Word, you are certainly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32). The Emmaus disciples, who had been sad, vividly tell us of their experience of the truth: "Did not our hearts burn within us as He talked to us on the way and explained the Bible to us?" (Luke 24:32.)

"Wait for the Lord to help you! Be strong [στη] and courageous!" (Ps. 27:14.) In ancient times the Jews wrote this word στη after each book, such as Genesis or Exodus, of the Old Testament. So Paul writes toward the end of First Corinthians (16:13) κραταιοῦθε, "be strong." "Be faithful until you die, and I will give you the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10). And the more our faith grows to be clear-eyed and independent and so stands in contrast with the world, the more delighted our Savior is with us. He says of the Roman captain, "I did not find anyone in Israel who believed like this" (Luke 7:9).

Then, in the terrors that are around and ahead of us, we'll be like passengers in an airliner who know that their pilot could destroy everyone on board but also that he is committed to carry them safely to their destination. In every danger we look to our Pilot and become unafraid: My Father is doing this, and all is well.

St. Louis, Mo.