

Fact, Faith, and Experience

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This paper is presented as a response to those who think of faith as a passive acceptance of truth rather than an active response.

*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for,
the evidence of things not seen.*

Hebrews 11:1

SUPPOSE YOU WERE ARRESTED for being a Christian. Would there be enough evidence to convict you? This question may seem to be little more than a cliché, but it is relevant nonetheless. Ask yourself, Would there be enough evidence? And just what would that evidence be?

We usually think of evidence as something presented in court to establish the facts of a case. At the beginning of a trial the facts may be hidden or obscured, but the evidence makes them clearer and more certain. There are many FACTS that exist in God which are hidden or obscure to those who have not experienced a spiritual rebirth. One of our primary responsibilities as believers is to provide evidence of these facts to those who don't believe.

In John's first epistle he cites three spiritual experiences which ought to be, or ought to eventually be, the EXPERIENCE of every believer. Why? Because these experiences provide glorious evidence of the reality of the invisible God. He begins, "I write to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake. I write to you, fathers, because you have known Him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the wicked one" (1 John 2:12-13).

Sins forgiven, knowledge of the eternal God, and victory over the devil –these are powerful spiritual experiences, which should be the experience of every believer. But are they? Unfortunately, in many cases no. Instead, the experience of many professing Christians consists of guilt, depression, and anxiety: spiritual conditions which are certainly not of God. Guilt, for example, is the result of having no confidence that God has forgiven your sins. The EXPERIENCE of forgiveness is the elimination of guilt. Similarly, depression is the result of having no victory over

the accusing, disheartening, demoralizing attacks of the adversary. But the EXPERIENCE of overcoming the wicked one is the eradication of depression. And anxiety is the result of not knowing God personally, not having direct access to the Prince of Peace and the quieting confidence and calm that only He can give. The EXPERIENCE of knowing God is the final, unequivocal abolition of anxiety.

Why does the experience of so many professing Christians fall so short of the wonderful blessings God has made available to man. Why is there so little evidence in their lives?

According to the writer of the book of Hebrews, the evidence of the unseen things of God is FAITH (11:1). The *New English Bible* tells us that FAITH causes the visible to come forth out of the invisible (11:3). While all professing believers would claim to have faith of some kind, the sad reality is that many do not have true, biblically defined faith. The reason for this is largely because the meaning of faith has been so watered down, so diluted from the kind of faith described in the Word of God.

To understand true, biblical FAITH, we must begin by understanding God's grace. When it comes to living for God, everything is by grace: that is, by God's kindness, by His unmerited favor, by His loving disposition toward us. This means that all things are done *by God -for man*. Man is saved by grace alone, completely apart from any meritorious conduct.

Everything that we need has already been accomplished by God; therefore, since it is already done, we can call it FACT. And anything that is already an accomplished fact, we do not need to work again toward accomplishing. God has finished the work!

For example, suppose I gave you a check for a hundred dollars. That I have this amount of money in the bank is a FACT. You don't have to contribute toward it, because I have deposited the entire amount all by myself. But these funds do you no good as long as they stay in the bank; the only way you can experience that money and enjoy its benefits is by getting it out. In other words, you must translate the FACT into your own personal EXPERIENCE. But how do you do this?

The answer is FAITH. But if faith is the key to unlocking the storehouse of God, then isn't it vitally important that we understand what true faith really is?

The Story of the Great Valdini

Thousands had gathered together to see the Great Valdini. As he raised his hand to

speak, the crowd fell silent. Ladies and gentlemen, he said, I'm about to risk my life for your entertainment. As you can see, this cable is stretched from the American side to the Canadian side of Niagara Falls. In a moment I will pick up the balance bar and walk the cable to the other side, a feat never before accomplished by any human being. Who here believes that I can do it? "

The crowd roared in response, You are the world's greatest dare-devil, Valdini. If you say you can do it, then we believe you can do it. With that he picked up the bar and step by step disappeared into the mist from the falls.

After a few long minutes a hush began to settle over the crowd. He has fallen into the water, someone cried. Many began to feel an uneasy feeling deep down in the pit of their stomachs. After what seemed an eternity, Valdini suddenly emerged from the mist on the Canadian side. He had made it. It was the greatest dare-devil act in human history. Everyone watching breathed a sigh of welcomed relief.

But what was this? Valdini was on the cable again. He was walking back across the falls to the American side. Once again he disappeared into the mist and once again he emerged victorious on the other side. The crowd greeted him with wild, enthusiastic cheers. Never before had they seen such courage and ability.

The great Valdini turned and gallantly bowed from the waist. After a few moment, he gestured for the crowd to be silent. Your applause has inspired me, he cried.

Your faith in me has made me decide to try something new. I am now going to push a wheelbarrow across the falls. Who here believes that I can do it? " You are the greatest dare-devil in the world, Valdini. If you say you can do it, then we believe you can do it, roared the approving crowd.

He then asked, Who here believes that I can push the wheelbarrow across with a man in it? Again the crowd responded, If you say you can do it, then we believe you can do it, Valdini. "

The great Valdini paused for a moment. Then, staring directly into the crowd, he asked, Who then will get in the wheelbarrow? The crowd stood silent. No one spoke. Again Valdini asked, I said which of you will ride across the falls in my wheelbarrow? The great Valdini did not receive a single affirmative answer.

My question for you is this: Would you have climbed into that wheelbarrow? This story illustrates the difference between head faith and heart faith. Head faith is simply the acceptance of the truth of some stated fact. Heart faith is believing the fact enough to act on it. Someone said, If you don't live it, you don't believe it. " James put it this way, Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works (James 2:18b). In other words, simply saying we

believe is not enough. If we really believe, we must act.

Head faith is little more than *démon* faith. James also exhorts, "You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe; and tremble!" (2:19). Yes, even the demons accept the FACT of God, but they don't submit to His rule; they don't obey Him; they don't act as they should in response to that FACT.

Head faith is also *déad* faith. James says, "But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?" (2:20). *The Amplified Bible* says: "Faith apart from [good] works is inactive and ineffective and worthless. *The Goodspeed Translation* says: "Faith without good deeds amounts to nothing." And *The Living Letters* translation reads: "Faith that does not result in good deeds is not real faith."

Head faith alone cannot translate the FACTS of God into personal EXPERIENCE. As Bible commentator Matthew Henry writes: "He who boasts of faith without works is to be looked upon at present as a foolish condemned person. Faith without works is said to be dead, not only as void of all those operations which are the proofs of spiritual life, but as unavailable to eternal life."

A big part of the problem here is the way the whole notion of *bélieving* or *háving* faith has been redefined in our modern age. Let's go back for a moment and examine the true biblical meaning. The various words translated *fáith* or *bélieve* in the New Testament all find their origin in the Greek word *peitho* (pronounced *pee-tho*). The most basic definition of this word is *tó* be fully persuaded; to be convinced beyond all doubt; to be in complete agreement. In other words, *peitho* means to be so fully persuaded of a fact that you will actually alter your behavior and act upon that fact.

In Romans 10:10, Paul tells us that with the *héart* one believes unto righteousness "not with the head. If a fact isn't influencing or motivating our actions, then it is still in the head; it hasn't yet gotten down into the heart.

Concerning the word *peitho*, W.E. Vine writes: "When a man obeys God he gives the only possible evidence that in his heart he believes God. Of course it is persuasion of the truth that results in faith (we believe because we are persuaded that the thing is true, a thing does not become true because it is believed). As Christian writer David Bernard explains: "The only way God or anyone else sees our faith is through our response. Faith is not just a condition of the mind but a life-changing force."

Heart vs Mind

To the ancient Greeks, the ultimate goal of oratory was always *peitho*. For example, if a politician believed strongly that the Athenians should go to war against the Peloponnesians, he would stand up in the assembly and do his utmost to persuade his fellow politicians of his viewpoint. If the assembly voted to go to war, then the politician had achieved *peitho*. If they they did not, this meant he had fallen short of the goal. The ability to persuade through oratory was so highly revered among the Greeks that they actually deified *peitho*, even using the word as the name of a goddess.

When Paul came to Thessalonica, the Bible says he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again (Acts 17:2-3). We know that Paul was an effective orator of truth because the Bible says, And some of them were persuaded [*peitho*]. The evidence that they were persuaded was that they joined Paul and Silas (17:4). But the Bible also says that the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar (17:5). Isn't it amazing. Those who get the truth down into their hearts want to be part of the church, but those who don't only want to cause trouble.

There is another word used frequently in the Bible that pertains to what goes on in the head. This word is *logizomai* (pronounced *lo-gid-zom-ahee*), which is variously translated reckon, conclude, reason, suppose, think on. In essence it means to take an inventory; to make an estimation; to add it all up and come to a conclusion. Clearly this word describes a mental process. Adding up, reasoning, concluding—these all take place in the head. But it is possible to mentally conclude that something is true, to acknowledge something as being a fact, and yet still not act upon your conclusion (as happened in the story of the Great Valdini). It is not until we act that God recognizes what we profess to believe as FAITH.

Many today have redefined *peitho* with the definition of *logizomai*. They have relegated faith to a mere acceptance of fact. They believe that Jesus existed. They may even believe that Jesus died for them and rose from the dead. But they feel no compulsion to obey Him. They feel no obligation to live out the teachings of the Bible. Alas, this is not biblical faith.

Paul was excited about the wonderful spiritual experiences of the believers in Rome. He wrote, But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness (Romans 6:17-18). The form of doctrine was the statement of FACT reported to these people by the preaching of the gospel. Apparently they were so persuaded of the facts

concerning Jesus Christ that they obeyed –not grudgingly, not superficially, not reluctantly –but from the heart. This is genuine biblical FAITH!

And look what changed about their experience. They had been slaves to sin. But after obeying from the heart they were set free from sin and became slaves of righteousness. If you want to EXPERIENCE the power of God working in your life, you first have to know the FACTS. You then must respond to those facts in exactly the way the Bible calls for –and you must respond joyfully from the heart. This is the FAITH that translates God's FACT into your personal EXPERIENCE. Anything less prevents God from working in your life.

Let's look at some biblical examples of this principle in action. And as we look at these examples, keep in mind that all authentic spiritual experiences must be based upon an explicit biblical fact. The facts of the Bible are what God has accomplished for us. We have no input into them. We cannot change them, add to them, or improve upon them in any measure. The facts include His promises, His redemptive work, and His gifts of grace. All of the facts of God are the result of His grace, His unmerited kindness and goodness toward us.

Example 1. Knowledge of the Eternal God

The EXPERIENCE of knowing God in an intimate and personal way is founded upon the FACT established in Jesus' statement, "No one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Matthew 11:27). The FACT that the Man Jesus knows God is absolute evidence that the Eternal God can be known by temporal man. Hebrews 2:17 tells us that Jesus was in all things made like His brethren. " Hebrews 4:15 tells us that He was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. The Son was an authentic Man. The only difference between Him and us is that He was never separated from the power and presence of God by sin, except perhaps for those agonizing moments He hung on the Cross.

Only the Man Jesus knows God and is known by God. He is the one human being who is wrapped together into eternal union with the Divine Essence. He is in the Father and the Father is in Him. And only He can impart this knowledge to a fellow human being.

Now how is this FACT translated into our personal EXPERIENCE of knowing God for ourselves? The answer lies in Jesus' next statement, "Come to Me..." (Matthew 11:28). If a person is to ever find the knowledge of God, He must be willing to come to Jesus Christ. Jesus told His followers, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). If a

person is not willing to come to Jesus, we cannot know God and cannot take hold of eternal life, regardless of how religious or Bible literate he or she may be.

Jesus chided the Jews saying, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life" (John 5:39-40). The Bible defines and describes Jesus for us so we can accurately come to Him, but only He can reveal God to us. As He said, He reveals the Father to whoever He wills. Only the Son, the Man, can reveal God fully and completely, for God is manifested in Him; that is, in His flesh.

Paul wrote of the possibility of coming to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ (Colossians 2:2). This is the will of God for every believer. But if we are to come to this knowledge, we must come to Jesus — holding back nothing, eager to serve Him, no holds barred, ready to do His will. Jesus is fully able to open the eyes of our understanding that we may be filled with the knowledge of God. Our part, our FAITH, is to come to Him.

Example Number 2. Victory Over the Devil

The EXPERIENCE of overcoming the devil is founded upon the FACT that Jesus Himself overcame the devil through His death on the Cross. Concerning this monumental achievement, Paul writes, "Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it" (Colossians 2:15). It is further derived from the FACT that Jesus has delegated His authority over the power of evil to us, a FACT reported in Luke 10:19 when Jesus said, "Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you."

Now how do we convert the FACT that Jesus has given us authority over the devil into our own victorious EXPERIENCE? First let us establish some additional relevant FACTS. Paul writes of Christ that He is seated in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come (Ephesians 1:20-21).

This verse establishes the FACT that Jesus is seated in a position of authority far above every one of our spiritual enemies. But Paul doesn't stop there. He also says of every true believer that we have been spiritually uplifted and made to sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:6). This verse establishes the additional FACT that as believers, we are in the same spiritual position as Jesus, far above all of our adversaries.

Now if these FACTS are indeed FACTS, then what must our FAITH-response be? Whereas to know God we must come to Jesus Christ; to defeat the devil in our lives we must do more than come to Him —we must take up residence within Him. How do we do this? By carefully following the teachings of the Word of God. After establishing our spiritual position in the book of Ephesians, Paul then makes a transitional statement. He says, in essence, since this is where God says we are (the FACT), this is what we ought to be doing. Here is how he expresses this idea:

This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk (Ephesians 4:17). The key word here is *therefore*. ” The FACT is this, the available EXPERIENCE is this, THEREFORE you ought to do this —whatever this is, that is the FAITH. And what is it that we must do? We must not continue living as Gentiles, as unbelievers. We have been called to a higher way of living.

We cannot expect to overcome the devil if we continue to indulge our fleshly desires and worldly lusts. We must bring ourselves under the authority of Jesus Christ and line ourselves up with the Word of God. It is not enough to simply say we are dwelling in Christ. As John reminds us, He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked (1 John 2:6).

The church in Rome was full of new believers who were just beginning to overthrow the power of Satan in their lives. Therefore Paul wrote to them, For your obedience has become known to all. Therefore I am glad on your behalf; but I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil. And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly (Romans 16:19-20). For Satan to be crushed under our feet, we must be obedient to God.

When John wrote his first epistle, he was writing to people who had overcome the wicked one. Therefore, he wrote to them, We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him (1 John 5:18). The word translated *touch* ” actually means *to cling to or fasten onto*. In other words, if we will obey God and keep ourselves from habitual sin, then the devil will not be able to get his claws into us. Another meaning of the word translated *touch* is *to set on fire*. ” The devil can no longer inflame our carnal passions or incite us to outbursts of anger once we have crushed him under our feet.

If we really want the personal EXPERIENCE of overcoming the devil, then we must act in FAITH, putting off all wrong conduct and putting on all proper conduct, for those who are hearers of the Word but fail to be doers only end up deceiving themselves and making themselves easy prey for the adversary of their souls.

Example Number 3. Sins Forgiven

The EXPERIENCE of sins forgiven is founded upon the FACT that Jesus Christ shed His own blood for the forgiveness of the sins of all humanity. This FACT began to be established in an upper room in Jerusalem nearly two thousand years ago when Jesus said, "Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:27-28). We know that only a short while after Jesus spoke these words His blood was indeed shed on the cruel cross of Calvary. The question is: Do I accept His statement that it was for the remission of sins, especially of my sins? By the way, the word "remission" (Greek *aphesis*) is frequently translated "forgiveness." "Remission and forgiveness are interchangeable terms in the New Testament.

Now how does the FACT that Jesus Christ shed His blood for the remission of my sins translate into the EXPERIENCE of having had my sins forgiven, having had my conscience washed clean? After His resurrection, Jesus told the apostles that "repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47). In other words, He sent them out to proclaim the FACT. Paul tells us that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). We must become aware of the FACT before we can exercise FAITH in it and EXPERIENCE the promise of it.

What then is our FAITH-response that translates this FACT into a personal EXPERIENCE? In the second chapter of the book of Acts, the Bible says: "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?' In other words, they heard the FACT and asked, 'How shall we respond to this fact?' Peter then answered them by saying, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'" "

Water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ is the act of FAITH that turns God's FACT into our personal EXPERIENCE. Revelation 1:5 speaks of Jesus Christ as the One who "loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood." But how did the FACT of that washing become the personal EXPERIENCE of Paul? In Acts 22:16 Paul was told, "Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord." More is required than simply accepting the FACT that Jesus shed His blood for me. The genuineness of my FAITH must be shown by my obeying from the heart the command to be baptized in water.

Faith is initially unseen —it is of the heart. But it must not remain unseen. There must be evidence. What is the evidence that we believe Jesus shed His blood for the forgiveness of our sins? The evidence of our unseen faith is visible baptism in water in the name of Jesus Christ.

Jesus sent His apostles out to preach the gospel to every creature. And who would be saved by the power of this gospel? In Jesus' own words, **He who believes and is baptized will be saved** (Mark 16:16). Why was baptism necessary? Because it was necessary that faith be expressed, be acted upon; otherwise God's hands are tied. He cannot give the desired EXPERIENCE without the proper expression of FAITH. The people in Samaria understood this, for the Bible says, **When they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized** (Acts 8:12). The people in Corinth also understood this, for the Bible says, **And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized** (Acts 18:8). They heard the FACT of the shed blood and made it their personal EXPERIENCE by expressing their FAITH in water baptism. Apart from baptism in the name of Jesus Christ there is no EXPERIENCE of the forgiveness of sins.

Have you been washed in the blood?