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"By Faith..."

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Heb. 10:37-39; 11:12:1-2.

In order rightly to appreciate and apprehend the value of this part of the letter, from the end of Chapter 10 through into Chapter 12, we have to remember the position in which these Hebrew believers were represented as being, or the position to which they were being called, or of which they were being reminded; that is, the heavenly position as over against the one to which they were at least in danger of falling. You know that the whole purpose of this letter was to cut in between these believers and that which was seeking to bring them down again on to an earthly religious level and basis, as under the government of the outward temporal forms of religious life as set up through Moses. The course of the letter is the unveiling of the fact that all those Old Testament things were but shadows of Christ Who was the substance; pointing on to Him, and that with His coming all were fulfilled and became heavenly in meaning, in value, for life now. And now these saints, under great pressure and trial, were being tempted to let go the heavenly position and come down again to the earthly, to that which, for the flesh, is so much easier a position of just doing religious things outwardly, and letting that be the beginning and end of everything. Thus the heavenly position is that which gives point to this last great summary, and it shows that it is the very position to which the Lord's people are called which becomes the ground of their greatest testings, that they are tried according to the position they have taken. That is so in every grade and every stage and every level. If the measure is small, then we are tested according to that measure, but if we take the full and the ultimate and the highest, then the testing becomes supreme. We are tested according to the position we take up.

Every Dispensation Governed by Faith

Now, there is another thing which this shows, and it is that faith is not something which has come with the New Testament dispensation, but that faith has been the principle by which the Lord governed His saints in every age. The Lord never intended the dispensation of the law through Moses to be other than a faith dispensation, and it is not just the contrast between the works of the law and faith that is before us; because you have faith here taken up in relation to all the people who were under the law and made the standard of their judgment. By faith Moses... by faith Israel, and onward under that whole dispensation, everybody was judged according to faith. Faith ever has been and ever will be the primary thing with God, the supreme thing. It is a thing which governs all ages in the mind of the Lord. Faith is *the* thing for every age.

The Basis of Faith

Now, what is the basis of faith? When you look at this chapter, the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, to see what the basis of faith is, you discover that it is and was something spiritual, done *within* a person. I know that in a number of cases recorded here, things happened without. There is Sarah, there is Isaac, there was deliverance from the furnace: many things like that happened without. But whatever happened without depended entirely upon something which had happened within. We do not know how all these things took place. For instance, by faith, when he was called of God, Abraham went out. We do not know how he was called of God. It may have been that an angel of the Lord appeared unto him, or the Lord Himself may have appeared in a bodily form to Abraham. Now we might say, Oh, if only that happened to us, then it would give us such a substantial foundation for faith! If only three men appeared to us as they appeared to Abraham, and proved to be the very representation of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost in bodily form (as I think undoubtedly they were; if you look at the incident closely, that is the implication), how easy faith would be, or how different would be our foundation for faith! He was called of God.

Now, beloved, I do not think it was a thing which happened without which became the foundation of faith. It was something which, however it came - it may have come by outward instrumentalities, outward things - however it came, it was something which was done inside, something registered inside, something effected in an inward way; for it is very doubtful whether ever an outward happening, a phenomenon, however marvellous it might be, be it an angel from heaven, can ever be an abiding, solid basis for faith. We can at times under given circumstances always doubt our greatest outward experiences. There is that in us called the soul which is a psychical thing and it is capable of producing the most remarkable and astonishing phenomena, so that we can believe things which the soul produces, and then presently turn round and say, Well, I was evidently overwrought, things began to happen, I heard things, I saw things! Thus we may question all that on a psychical or psychological basis. That is the temptation. Was I really at that time in a state of poise and balance, or was I in a state of nervous tension? Did I imagine these things, and were they only after all psychical things? And that could happen to any of these men in either the Old or New Testament. If that were the basis of faith, it is altogether unsound and unsatisfactory. However the Lord comes and whatever means He uses, the real basis of faith is something that has been effected in us, something wrought. Although it may have been the God of glory Who appeared unto our father Abraham, the effect was this, that Abraham knew something had happened in him, something had been wrought in him, and he could say from that time, There is something in me that is much deeper than the means and method used by the Lord, that has become a part of my very being! If you think for a moment that, were an angel to come to you, you could more easily believe in the future than you can without the angel, remember you can always doubt your angels. There is no guarantee that you will believe because you have seen an angel, or because you have had an open heaven. It is something which has to be inside, which, after all, is invisible, intangible, but something very real. It is something the Lord has done, something of the Lord Himself, something that the Lord

has made real to you about Himself, His way, His mind, His will, something wrought by the Holy Spirit. That is the basis of faith - the Lord and His effect in your own life. I am not saying your experience is to be the basis of faith, but the Lord Himself as a reality within you, effecting something in you and affecting you in a deep inward way. That is the essence of faith here in this chapter right through. They knew the Lord in an inward way, and that was the beginning and that is the end for them in the matter of faith.

The Nature of Faith

Now, you see there was a result from that. They came to a place where they could and did believe for something which must eventuate, though in many cases, in the majority of cases, it never did eventuate in their lifetime. But the great statement here in this chapter is that this made no difference. They had come to such a position with the Lord, in this knowing of Him, that they could all die not having received the promises. All died in faith. You see, they did not even at the last have the stimulus of seeing the thing materialising; but they were able to die in faith. It may be somewhat easier to live in faith, if by that you mean that you expect the thing to be realised in your lifetime. But the essence of faith is - 'This must be! It is a part of God, it is God Himself, and whether I live to see it or not, that makes no difference to faith; it will be! And I live now, not to see it in my lifetime, but I live now in relation to it to be realised at some time in the purpose and intention of God'.

Then we have a further wonderful statement. They received not the promises, they died in faith, but they looked on, they looked on *to us*. Faith carried them beyond their own lifetime, and the statement is that they could not "be made perfect". That word 'perfect' is very interesting. It simply means they could not come to the consummation, the full growth of their faith. That thing could not reach its ultimate end until we came in. It demanded us. They, apart from us, could not reach the consummation of their faith; and faith goes on and sees that there are yet things to be brought in by God for the realisation of that which is in our hearts, for which we are living, for which we are labouring, for which we are suffering, for which we are being patient. Faith goes right on to the end and says, It may not be in my time; there may be more things to be brought in yet to make the consummation possible, but eventually, my faith in God will be vindicated, and the thing will be realised! Faith is a big thing, a comprehensive thing, and a real purity of faith means we do not just live to see things in our time, so that, should there be any doubt about our seeing them in our time, faith would go out. That is not the essence of faith at all. We have to have an after-life faith, a long view faith, which is not made less active because the prospect of a full realisation in our time begins to be overshadowed. No, their faith came into being on the ground that God intended something and they knew it, and God would realise it sooner or later; but God might have to bring in much more even after they were gone to realise it. Moreover, they were with God for that with all their hearts. Even though they might not see it, it must be. That is the basis and nature of faith here.

The Issue of Faith

What then is the issue? Twice over it says here that, by this kind of faith, they received a good report. The elders received a good report (v. 2). Then, toward the end, it says they all received a good report (v. 39). That is what they did receive - a good report. What is a good report? You know in the next chapter, Chapter 12, we are children at school, children of a family. Father is dealing with us as with sons, and it is all part of this whole argument: My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord and so on. It is all for this good report. I do not believe that it is true in the case of those referred to in Chapter 11 that the good report related to what they achieved, what clever people they were, what they were able to do in their lifetime. That was not the good report. God is writing the report of their life. What is the report for? No, it was not because they achieved so many wonderful things.

The good report was this, they trusted in the Lord and did their utmost through faith. They did not say, Oh, well, this will never be realised in our lifetime we shall never be able to see this done; it is no use! It needs better people than we are! No, they faced the whole thing, and saw that, in the main, the thing was humanly impossible, only God could do it. But that did not make them sit back and say, Oh, I can never be in this, and never have a part in this: I can never be of any use in this! No, they believed God, they trusted the Lord, and then they put themselves right into it with all their hearts and lived in a positive trust in God. They did all that faith could lead them and make them to do. Faith is always an active thing. The good report was that they trusted the Lord and got down to it, gave themselves to it, however difficult things were.

Faith is going to determine which of two things is going to characterise us. This is the real point. It is either going to be that we are living under a terrible paralysis, as altogether petrified through confusion, perplexity, inability to understand, being unable to disentangle, to sort things out, to see straight and see clearly, to know what is meant by happenings. That means utter paralysis, simply standing with our hands on our hips, helpless and hopeless. That is the effect of the absence of a positive faith. The only way of life and deliverance from such a paralysis is a deliberate faith in God which causes us to take the attitude that we are going on with God, understanding or not understanding, explaining or not explaining, having light or having no light; we are going right on with God on the basis of what God has done in us, made real in us, of what God Himself is to us by what He has effected in us. We are going on!

We, beloved, shall come there and may come there more than once in the course of our life; we shall come to the place where we realise we are going right out into outer darkness and despair and paralysis, to be ruled completely out of any effectiveness, fruitfulness, or value whatever, unless we pull ourselves together and say to ourselves, 'The whole thing is an inexplicable, bewildering confusion, tangle from our standpoint or the standpoint of man; but God is, God is faithful. That is what He Himself says He is'. Thus without questioning God we go on believing God. We have even to believe God to the point of putting over on to Him the responsibility for failures, for mistakes, in so far as we have really and honestly put our lives at His disposal and have become utter for God and are free from personal interests and worldly interests and are here only for God. We have to make over to the Lord's account things which may have been mistakes or failures, and trust Him with these and go on.

What is the alternative? That is always the point. What is the alternative? It is to give up and go out, to lose our ground altogether; and when you come to weigh it up at the end - why? Well, we did not trust the Lord. You see, the Lord is not requiring that we should be perfect as God is, and that is the standard we are trying to get to so often; that we never make a mistake, that we never have a question about it, that our way has been so utterly perfect that we have every confidence in our own way and every step we have taken. No, you and I will never be there. Abraham made mistakes, Moses made mistakes. All those people made mistakes. Elijah was a man of like passions as we are, and Elijah threw himself under a juniper tree and requested for himself that he might die. They all went that way, but you see here is the record - they all obtained a good report. Oh, Elijah got a good report. Moses getting angry and losing the promised land, got a good report. Abraham going down to Egypt, Abraham and Ishmael; Abraham got a good report. Do not let us try to be perfect as God is perfect. What the Lord wants is a heart perfect toward Him; not that we did our work perfectly but that we trusted the Lord. We must ever remember that there is a great difference between faith and presumption, between faith and self-will or self-strength. Faith is based upon selflessness, and men of faith have always been very humble men, marked by adjustableness when they made mistakes. Let us not seek to be infallible, but faithful.