



Conducted by
Alf Marsden

"I HAVE often heard preachers say that we should live by faith, and I have never understood completely what this means. Could you please explain, in terms of the christian life, what the phrase 'we live by faith' really means?"

I AM glad that the questioner has had the courage to ask a question like this. I sue the word 'courage' advisedly because on the face of it some would say, "Surely you know what faith is", and by the tone of voice they would imply that the one who asked the question was in some way mentally deficient, or intellectually incapable. But I am persuaded that many such nebulous statements are made in sermons, talks, and discussions, and because the listeners don't want to appear to be ignorant, they let the statements pass without any real understanding, indeed, in many cases, the speakers would find it a little difficult to explain in detail some of the statements which roll off the tongue so easily and glibly. However, as we have said so often in the past, the Bible is the best explainer of the doctrine it contains, and as always, we must turn to it for enlightenment.

The foundations of faith

If we examine our lives in fundamental detail, I think we shall find that we live according to propositions which we either accept or reject. Every day we have to make decisions and judgments, and these will be based, in faith, on what we see and understand as the meaning of life. When a person accepts what he considers to be fundamental and absolute truth, he does so in faith; there is no way in which he can prove it. Conversely, an atheist must rely on a faith that there is no God, because he cannot prove that his assumptions are valid. There is no way in life that we can avoid decisions of faith. When people attend meetings and hear a powerful gospel address we sometimes say, "Well how can they leave without making a decision after a gospel message like that?" But they do make a decision; even a decision to do nothing is a decision of faith on their part. How, then, are we to be guided? On what does the christian base his decisions, and how does the christian faith commend itself?

First of all there is the Bible. The Bible needs friends, not enemies, but unfortunately many of its so-called friends have practiced textual vivisection on it, they have quoted it out of context; they have used it as a bludgeon to beat their opponents into submission, but they have not seen it as the living embodiment of their own faith. No one would deny that the Bible exists. Nor would they deny that it speaks about God's intervention in the affairs of men in the person of His Son, Christ Jesus. The authority and integrity of the biblical records and documents have stood up to the most rigorous and searching criticism. No miraculous claim is made for the Bible; it stands on its own. There is no way of going beyond or behind what the apostles said in the New Testament. The Bible when taken as a whole has extraordinary unity; it is completely meaningful when the voices of prophets and apostles are taken together. The christian sees it as the supreme embodiment of his faith, and he preaches and teaches from it as a commendation of his faith to others.

Secondly, another fact to commend the christian faith to people is the Church. You might be excused for thinking that a hopelessly divided Church would be the last thing for commending the christian faith, many people have been turned away from christianity because of divisions in the church. But such an argument surely misses the point; from the beginning of christianity, those who have 'been obedient to the faith' have been the Church. That is a fact; and a world which seems to judge from facts should read the second chapter of Acts of Apostles. Furthermore, if being 'obedient to the faith' means being obedient to the teaching of the Bible, and if obedience to the teaching of the Bible regarding God and Christ results in entry into the Church then the authority and integrity of the Church is just as well attested to as that of the Bible. So the christian now has two facts to commend his faith to others; the Bible and the Church.

There is a third and, perhaps, most vital fact, and that is the inner conviction of the christian that he is a new creation in Christ Jesus. It is comparatively easy to teach people about the Bible and the Church, but how do I set about communicating the faith that I have to someone else? The christian is, as Peter says, 'a partaker of the divine nature'. He is a recipient of the Holy Spirit, and it is the Holy Spirit who confirms to the christian that what he has believed about the Bible and the Church is absolutely true. This is what gives the inner conviction. It seems to me that all can be summated in the reception of Christ Jesus into the individual life; He is the true embodiment of the christian faith. The Bible teaches Jesus; the Church worships and elevates His name; and the Holy Spirit testifies to Him. Paul could say, "And the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me". (Gal. 2:20). Perhaps we are now in a position to say what we mean by the statement, 'we live by faith'.

Worth believing

Surely the christian who lives by faith must inevitably come to the conclusion that what he has believed is worth believing, especially when he contrasts his christian beliefs with what the world asks him to believe. Let us examine two of the most fundamental beliefs.

1 "For he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him" (Heb. 11:6). Is that worth believing? To believe that the uncreated

Creator loves me and cares for me so much that He was willing to intervene to save me from sin and death; that is a belief which thrills the heart. To believe that before time was, God is, and that such a majestic and timeless God can be my heavenly Father, is more than the mind can grasp. Is there anything better than to live by faith toward such a God and Father?

2 "She saith unto him, Yea, Lord; I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world" (John 11:27). Is what Martha believed and confessed worth believing? The disciples evidently thought so because to them he became life; and so he does to all who believe and accept him in obedience to the gospel. They saw him compassionately moving among the people; they marvelled at the gracious words that fell from his lips; their hearts bled with grief when they saw him at the place of execution. They loved him because they knew that he loved them, and that he had come into the world to freely bestow that love to all mankind, especially to those who would respond to it. Is Jesus worth believing on? Let Peter answer, "Unto you therefore which believe he is precious" (1 Peter 2:7). Indeed he is.

Worth doing

To live by faith is, I believe, to lose our will in God's will. The Christian should not need to ask if this is worth doing. The tragedy is, of course, that many times we are intent on fulfilling our physical appetites to the detriment of our spiritual appetites. Once when the disciples begged Jesus to eat, he said to them, "I have meat to eat that ye know not of" (John 4:32-34). The disciples wondered at this and asked if anyone had brought him food, but Jesus elaborated, "My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work". Evidently Jesus found God's will worth doing, and so should we.

Doesn't the Bible teach us about the foolishness of being self-willed? We sometimes strut about the stage of life as if we were the principal actors; our egos and knowledge are, in our own estimation, of paramount importance. We should listen to what Jesus says, "I can of my own self do nothing: as I hear I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will. but the will of the Father which hath sent me" (John 5:30). Sweet will of God! Jesus realised that without God his mission on earth could not prosper. How dare we, spiritual pygmies as we are when compared to Jesus, think that we can accomplish great things in our own strength? Is it worth doing to live by faith in such a God? Why are we not willing to rest in the everlasting arms? How vociferously we sing "I surrender all", and yet our 'all' represents only the crumbs from the table. Have we forgotten that He, out of the munificence of His glory, has dispensed to us blessings that we could never have achieved for ourselves; could never even have dreamed of. Let Paul teach us, "And be not conformed to this world; but ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Rom. 12:2). Is it worth doing, to live by faith? We shall find so when we are willing to prove His will in our lives.

Worth becoming

To live by faith is not an irksome task, especially when we appreciate that by so doing we are walking the highway to glory. We do well to remember our former estate; as Paul put it to the Ephesians, "at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who some-times were afar off are made nigh by the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:12,13). Was it worthwhile to become a child of God? Are there as many of our deposits in the Bank of Heaven as there are in the vaults of the secular banks here upon earth? God not only sees us as we are, but He sees us as we can become by His divine grace and power. Stunted growth, or magnificent spiritual development: which shall it be? I can do no better than to echo the words of John, "Beloved, now are we the Sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure" (1 John 3:2,3).

Yes, 'to live by faith' may not always be easy; it may even result in hardship, but as Paul says, 'For I reckon that the suffering of this present time is not worthy to be compared

with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18). Is, then, the christian faith worth the attitude of Paul, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me". (Gal. 2:20). Even so, Lord Jesus, even so.