

FAITH: The Gift of God

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THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

13: *The Two Roads*

I think I see you, Christian, standing before two old paths. One is called ‘the High Road’; the other, ‘the Low Road’. A weather-beaten gate opens into each. On the gate to the High Road a hand has chiselled the word ‘WHO’. On the gate to the Low Road that same hand has carved ‘WHY’. You are about to enter one of these paths. But which shall it be? In this case the decision is yours.

The path behind the gate marked ‘WHY’ is a jagged path. Many a pilgrim has been seen bleeding and disheartened in this road. It is easy to stumble on the Low Road. I’m sorry to say that more than one pilgrim has insisted on following this path all his life.

The path behind the gate marked ‘WHO’ is a friendlier path. Not so many pilgrims start out on this road, but all along the way a man may catch a glimpse of a brother or sister climbing upwards seeking to find a route from the Low Road below. Times without number I have seen a pilgrim on the High Road reach down a hand to someone below and tug at him till he is up and over the edge. It is a great sight to see.

The Low Road marked ‘WHY’ is the path of the Christian who insists on knowing the reason for all that happens to him. He needs to know in specific detail. He is not satisfied with the general answer: it is for

your good and the glory of God. He needs more. He insists on more.

The man on the Low Road is bound to be disappointed. We have but one revelation from God – the Bible – designed to answer our detailed questions. Yet the Bible does not tell us in detail why *all* things happen to us. Take the experiences of just one day. How many things will happen to us today? Ten? One hundred? One thousand? I know no way to count them. But if I cannot count them how shall I analyse them all? How shall I find the reasons for them? I cannot.

Yet some men will select the more important events of their daily lives and brood over them. ‘There must be a reason for this,’ they say. ‘Why did God allow this? Why did He send it my way?’ And they feel that either (1) God owes them an answer, or (2) He has given it and they are too dense or unspiritual to see it. Either conclusion is disheartening.

The whole process is complicated in another way. Occasionally, but not often, God gives us a glimpse of what He is doing. I think, for instance, of the story we hear now and then of a Christian missing an air flight that later crashes. He reasons rightly that God was not finished with him. That much of God’s intent could not be missed. But most of life is not like that, and ‘why?’ crops up to haunt us again and again.

Men do not give up thinking when they enter the High Road. ‘Why?’ can be a useful question. It is heard on the High Road as well as on the Low. But the difference is this. On the High Road a Christian is able to relieve his anxiety. When he can find no reason *why*, he is content to go a step further. The High Road is

the road where they concentrate on 'WHO', that is, on God.

In the earlier chapters of this book I shared with you an important truth. I said, in effect, that God was the author of salvation from beginning to end. Each man who is saved comes to Christ because God chooses to save him.

By saving whom He pleases God gets the glory and men are kept from boasting. Those are two good Biblical explanations of our salvation at the hand of God.

But no one supposes that those reasons tell the whole story. At least I do not. Perhaps, in our present condition, they are all that we can grasp. I believe it was Martin Luther who once made a helpful distinction. He divided the Christian man's life into three periods: nature, grace, and glory. Then he said in effect, 'Grace has revealed a good deal that nature did not. Can we not also believe that glory will reveal what grace has not?' Yes, we can believe that, for 'now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face' (I Corinthians 13:12). Or in the words of an American gospel song, 'We will understand it better by and by.'

But something more must be said. If there is more to know and we can not know it now, that also is no accident. God could have made us differently originally. Or, He could give us greater capacity for understanding now. If God has not done these things, *that* too is a telling fact. That also needs explaining, and a cursory reading of the Bible will, I think, suggest the answer.

The Bible reveals God. The Bible reveals who God is. It unveils His works over many centuries. Yes, the purpose of the Book is to bring us to know God. In the

words of Christ: 'This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God' (John 17:3). Let me say it again: *the purpose of the Bible is to bring us to know the character of God*. To put it another way, the Bible is not an end in itself, it is a means to an end, and that end is the knowledge of God. Those who take the High Road have learned this. When they are exhausted from wrestling with WHY they fall back on WHO. They fall back on their knowledge of God.

The fact that God gives faith to some and not to others raises questions about the justice of God. They are questions that I cannot answer. I am tempted here to write down my half-answers for you, for I think I have made some progress, but I will not yield to the temptation. Half-answers, for the man who has not worked them out for himself, are no answers at all. And half-answers do not satisfy even the man who has them.

So, what can I do? I'll tell you what I have done, and what I think you must do. I have fallen back on the character of God.

God is just. That means that He will never plan an injustice – not to any man, not to the wickedest sinner who ever lived. *God is also wise.* That means that He knows how to carry out His just plans. There is no question of His not knowing what injustice is. *God is all-powerful too.* He never lacks the resources to put His justice into effect. The answer to our difficulties, you see, lies in a knowledge of God.

And God has designed things that way. That is the reason we know no more than we do. It is not our lack of spirituality or our denseness when compared to other Christians. In fact, the more 'spiritual' Christians – whoever they may be – have the same intellectual

problems that we have. God has made things that way. And, of course, He made them that way because He wanted to. And there we must leave the problem.

But all this raises another question: what precisely is the knowledge of God? What is it that I fall back on when I fall back on the knowledge of God? I raise this question because we use the word 'know' in two distinct ways when we speak of knowing a person. First, we say we know someone when we have been personally introduced to him, when we have shaken his hand and chatted with him for a few minutes perhaps. In other words, when personal contact has been made.

Second, we use the word 'know' when we have gathered information about someone. We may say, 'I know Napoleon well. I have studied his life for thirty years.' In this second use we are not claiming personal contact. But we are talking about a real knowledge of Napoleon.

Now, when we speak of the knowledge of God we mean both these things. We mean that we have had personal contact with God. We also mean that we have gathered facts about Him. Each is important. They are, however, important in different ways. Let me see if I can make this clear.

Personal contact with God does not supply us with information. Instead, it gives us a new attitude, a new state of mind. We receive the disposition to take in and apply the truths God has given us in His word. The new birth, for instance, is a touch from God. It is personal contact. The result of the new birth is the disposition to trust God. But it is the Bible that tells us in detail the character of the God we trust. The personal touch that we call the new birth does not do that.

The same is true of every touch from God. We all enjoy the feeling of nearness to God. There are times in Christian experience when we may say with Jacob, 'Surely the LORD is in this place!' May it please the Lord to grant us more such times! But there is danger here. There is the danger of focusing on the feeling of nearness and neglecting the *truth*.

I fear that many Christians have fallen into this trap. It is not that they do not read the Scriptures. It is rather that they do not read them *for information*. In fact, they sometimes harbour a suspicion that it is not quite spiritual to read the Bible for the truth it contains. The Bible, they think, must be read *devotionally*. But ask them what that means and they cannot tell you. Still they know it is true: the Bible must be read in a devotional way.

What shall we say in reply? The thing we need to say is this: they are right, of course, in what they say. But they must seek to understand what devotional reading is. Devotional reading is the opposite of academic reading. We can contrast reading *devotionally* with reading *academically*. But first let us compare them. What do they have in common? They have this in common: both types of reading are done for information. The devotional reader reads for information. The academic reader reads for information. Keep this in mind; the difference does not lie here.

What is the difference then? We may see it by looking more closely at that word *devotional*. The devotional reader is *devoted to* what he reads. That is, he feels loyalty to it. He is committed to it. He is faithful to it, or at least that is his intention. He may fall woefully short, but he aims to be true to what he reads.

The academic reader, on the other hand, is not committed to what he reads. He is reading for information *alone*. He may some day be committed to what he is now reading, but at this time he is not.

No Christian can be a merely academic reader of the Bible. A Christian is committed to the Scriptures. But a Christian *can* fall short of reading the Bible devotionally without realizing it. He may seek to read the Bible *emotionally*. Let me explain what I mean.

The academic reader is not usually greatly moved by what he reads. But the devotional reader is. Facts that *concern us* are deeply moving. When a man becomes a Christian he is deeply stirred by facts. He may have known these facts for some time, but now he sees their bearing on himself. That makes the difference. They come home to him. He may become ecstatic over truths that meant nothing a week before. His emotions come to life. Often Christian experience starts out like that.

Now comes the pitfall. Unless the new believer has never before been exposed to Christianity he is likely to underestimate the important part that *learning truths* has played in his conversion. Suppose he has grown up in a Christian home. He hardly remembers when he learned these truths. He has known the facts concerning Christ since childhood. Now, at last, he has embraced Christ. His life is transformed. He sees the world with new eyes. He hears music he has never heard before. All things are new. Is it any wonder if he gives more thought to his experience than he does to the truths which made it possible? And the more dramatic the experience the greater the risk would seem to be.

Let us say that he is now told that he must read the

Bible devotionally. What does this mean? It is likely to seem to mean that he must read in such a way as to prop up his new-found *feelings*. Keep your spiritual temperature up – that's the idea! And what about this advice? The advice to read devotionally is sound as far as it goes. But it does not go far enough. The man newly born again needs to be told what that means. He needs to be told that the impression that has been made on him has been made by *truth*. To be more exact, by *truths*, the truths concerning himself and the Lord Jesus. He is to read, then, in a certain way. He is to seek out God's truths and to give his loyalty to them.

I fear that many Christians read with the idea of inducing that same emotional state again. The Bible may come to be seen as a book that creates a kind of spiritual atmosphere. It may be seen as a mystical book. If one reads a set amount each day he is more likely to have this 'influence' go with him through the day. Never mind that he does not recall what he has read. At least he has had his 'devotions'. That is the best way to shore up his feelings through the day.

But it will not work. Why? Because God did not plan the Bible to work on our emotions directly. God did not intend to produce an aura of good feelings around the Bible reader. He intended, rather, to supply information. He aimed at teaching truth.

Has it ever struck you how lightly the Bible touches some matters? Take the crucifixion of Christ. Or, take the reality of hell. Notice how chastely it treats them. There is no effort to wring emotion from us. We see and feel the writers' restraint. We are not served up an atmosphere heavy with excitement. The facts are allowed to speak for themselves. The Bible is not an emotional book *in that way*.

If we are given the facts and if we are devoted to them – committed to them – our feelings will take care of themselves. If we read the Bible in this frame of mind we are reading devotionally, regardless of how we feel. To retain our emotional highs is not necessary. To keep up our commitment is.

And that brings us back to the knowledge of God. What do we fall back on when we fall back on the knowledge of God? We do not fall back on some recaptured ‘devotional’ feeling. We fall back on information. We review the truths about God’s Person, His character, revealed in the Scriptures. Nothing more – what more could we want? And nothing less – nothing less will do. The High Road is the road where men concentrate on ‘WHO’. They ask their questions. But when the answers escape them all is not lost. On the High Road pilgrims rest on the known character of their God. And, on the High Road, as on any other road, ‘rest’ feels good.

And now we are almost through. But before I close I want to speak to two questions that may have formed in your mind while reading this book. The first question is this: Do I really have faith? And the second is: How much faith must I have? These are good questions. And, judging by my experience, they are the kinds of questions that come up in the course of a study like this.

From one standpoint, both questions have the same answer. Not, of course, that anyone else can tell you whether you have faith in Jesus Christ. But help can be given, and I would like to give that help, if I can.

Mark this well: IT IS JESUS CHRIST WHO SAVES, AND NOT OUR FAITH.

What does that mean? It means that in talking about faith it is fatal to become mainly occupied with ourselves. We love to think about ourselves. And therein lies our danger. The man who would know whether He has trusted Christ needs to think on Christ.

The Bible compares the Christian life to marriage. In marriage a man and woman commit themselves to one another. The commitment of each is real. Yet neither the bride nor the bridegroom dwells on his or her own commitment. Rather, each thinks on the qualities of the other. Their commitment is drawn out by the qualities they see (or think they see) in the other.

And so it is with the Christian. The qualities he sees in Christ are the qualities of wisdom and nobility and truth. They are really there, and they draw the Christian. The creation of his faith, the strengthening of his faith, and the increase of his faith all come about from looking at the Lord Jesus. ‘How much faith?’ is the wrong question. The question is not ‘how much faith?’ but ‘faith in Whom?’

Commit yourself to Jesus Christ. Do it immediately. Do it irrevocably. Think not of the size of your commitment, but of the greatness of Christ. Though it is true that God gives faith, it is also true that He does not sound a trumpet before Him and shout, ‘I am about to give you faith!’ Look at the Lord Jesus and see Him, trustworthy and glorious. If you can see Him in that way you will not find it hard to trust Him. And when you have committed yourself to the One who irresistibly draws you to Himself, you may be sure that it is the power of God that has done it.

FAITH: THE GIFT OF GOD

You may be sure, in other words, that God has given you the gift of faith.

*Beneath a dark first-century sky,
Condemned, our Saviour hung to die
Upon a Roman cross.
The mocking crowd pressed close to stare
Upon His broken body bare
Without a sense of loss.*

*Could anything in any age
Supply a surer, better gauge
Of mankind's moral plight?
Could any man expect to find
An ear so closed, an eye so blind,
As those before that sight?*

*But, yes, one ugly thing can vie
With every ear and every eye
Stopped up by hate that day,
My heart, before the light shone in,
Was just as deeply stained by sin
And bent beneath its sway.*

*Great God, has grace before this found
A mind so dull, a will so bound,
As it exposed in me?
Small wonder I shall love to sing
The mercies of my God and King
Throughout eternity!*

*Tom Wells
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