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The Most Difficult Thing in the World

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Heb. 4:1-13; 11:5-6.

I am going to speak for a little while on the most difficult thing in the world, that is, faith. So far as the Lord's people are concerned, it can be truly said that the whole of their life in every aspect - salvation in its first step and every subsequent step, spiritual growth, spiritual sustenance, spiritual victory, spiritual work and service, fellowship with the Lord and ultimate glory is all resolved into one thing and that one thing is faith. Faith is the key to everything in our relationship to the Lord. It is all just a question of faith - not faith as something in itself, but faith in God. That is something which has to be faced and as far as possible at any point, settled; but it is not a thing which is settled once and for all. There has to be a settlement made again and again on this point. We are really continually confronted with this question; in the presence of new situations and trials and perplexities and seeming contradictions, am I going to believe God or not, am I going to repose faith in Him or not, am I going to trust the Lord or not? That is true all the way along, and it always will be so. And sometimes those testings are very, very acute and severe.

A brother wrote to me this week, one who has been greatly used of the Lord in other lands as well as in this one, who knows the Lord, and has a very real walk with the Lord, and he just put this in his letter. "It sometimes seems as though the Lord is a thousand miles away and has no interest whatever in me. It sometimes seems as though He has just cut me off". You may think that is very extreme, but some of you will not. You know quite well that such experiences are true to the life of a

child of God. I was saying that this is something that has to be faced. That is the life to which we are called. The Lord has not covered it, has not veiled it, hidden it from us. We are called unto a life of faith, and we had better face it; and then we must, as far as possible, if we are going to get through, settle it, for I repeat there is no step or stage or aspect of the life of the child of God from first to last, from the beginning to the end that is not a matter of faith. Well, that is a fact, and let us be quite honest about it, and quite frank with ourselves. That is the situation. It will help to a very large extent if we have looked this thing straight in the face and not shelved it, not tried to evade it, but accepted it.

A Key to Faith

But we want to get inside of this matter of faith, and here in this letter to the Hebrews which is, as you know, from start to finish, a letter on the matter of faith, we have amongst others one very helpful clue and key to faith. It is in this fourth chapter. You may not think that it really is a matter of faith for it does not seem to lie on the face of it, but when you examine it, you find that that is the thing that it is touching - this strange, somewhat technical language - "For the word of God is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit". You will notice that that statement begins with a 'for', and that 'for' links you with Israel in the wilderness failing to enter into rest. It is said that they had the Gospel preached to them, but the word spoken did not profit, not being mixed or united by *faith*. It did not profit, not being united by *faith*. Then there follows, "I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter into my rest". They could not enter in because of unbelief. Then more about the rest and their failure to enter in, and then - '*For the word of God divides between soul and spirit*'. This is the key to faith, or a key to faith. What is it? It is the conquest of the soul, and that is said to explain the whole of the wilderness failure and the subsequent not entering into the rest.

You know what soul is. I am not going to stay with soul and spirit very much. We know in this matter that the soul is the self-conscious life. By our souls we are conscious of ourselves and other people and all that world of things here. Spirit is just the God-conscious life. By our spirit we are conscious of God Who is Spirit, and all that realm. Self-conscious and God-conscious life, and because those two things were not defined, put apart and recognised in their difference, but allowed to overlap and bring about a state of confusion, they did not enter in. They failed because of unbelief. Well, what does that amount to? The self-conscious life predominated, and the God-conscious life did not predominate, was made subject and subservient. In other words, for them, everything was a matter of how self was affected by the situation and by the prospect. You find them again and again full of enthusiasm, full of zeal, full of what looked like real interest in the things of the Lord. Oh yes, they were going on, they were full of apparently real devotion to the Lord. But that was when the situation was pleasing them and when the prospect was presented so that it brought a great sense of possibilities for them, prospects for them, and their gratification. Oh, this is fine, this is good; tell us more about this wonderful land to which we are going, keep telling us about all its glorious wonders, and resources; go on, we are most interested in this, we are in for that! But it was all soul, self-conscious self-interest, self-gratification. And when there arose some situation, either present or in relation to that prospect which made it a matter of denying, sacrificing self, letting go self-interests, and having to face up to a very difficult situation which was going to be very costly to them, they were not so interested; their zeal went, and unbelief rose up; it was there and it rose up. They were not so concerned about this thing now, it was not now for them. What was it for? It was for the Lord *only* first, and their interests were entirely eclipsed. They would only come into their inheritance when the Lord got His. The Lord first; "Seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness;

and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33), and that putting first often meant a letting go of everything personal.

Does not that get right to the heart of this thing? What is disappointment to us? Can we always say that disappointment which we think is disappointment with the Lord and over His things is because we did so much want the Lord to have what He wanted irrespective of our interests at all; we were prepared to let everything go, we were not mixed up in this thing somehow? In the Lord getting what He wants, we see ourselves figuring in some way. It has to be a very sharp instrument that gets in between those two things and defines them because they are so mixed up. Is it not true that faith wavers, weakens and oftentimes goes right down and under when in the way of the Lord's interests *ourselves* are entirely shut out?

What is the key to faith then? The key to faith is this dividing of soul and spirit, or, in other words, it is the complete abnegation of self-interests - not in the Buddhist sense of annihilation, but in the sense of God's interests becoming positive and predominant. That is where the battle of faith rages; it rages upon that ground always. If we were so utterly - and not one of us really is - if we were so utterly consumed for the Lord's interests alone that no other interest in our lives had any precedence or power to govern us, we would be in victory all the time. It is this completely disinterested concern for what the Lord wants that is the key to faith. If Israel in the wilderness had taken this attitude - Well, this is a very difficult experience, but the Lord is after something, the Lord wants something, and He evidently knows that that is the best way to get it; all right, I am with Him, I may lose everything, I may suffer the loss of all things, but it is what the Lord wants that matters. The Lord wants us in that land; well, if it means everything, to be there for the Lord's pleasure, that is the thing that matters - if that had been their attitude, do you think they would have journeyed forty years in the wilderness round and round, do you think at the border of the land they would have been turned back to perish in the wilderness? You can see in the consummation, that next generation which did go in, went in on this matter of faith only. The whole story is based upon faith.

There is the faith of Rahab the harlot; her faith was the key to the land - Jericho. Then there was the faith of going round six days in silence and on the seventh the shout of faith, without drawing a sword or turning a hand to do anything but go round - ridiculous! It is all such utter faith. They went up and possessed on that basis. That generation did enter in because of faith, whereas the generation before did not enter in because of unbelief. But this generation went up because Joshua and Caleb had said, If the Lord delight in us, He will bring us in (Num. 14:8). That is the matter - it is the delight of the Lord, perfectly disinterested concern for what the Lord wants, and that is one of the most difficult things in life, to get this self out of the way.

The Result of Faith

(a) Rest

So, just finally, a little word on the result of faith. First of all, of course, it is rest. We are not now thinking of some future rest, some future land, whatever our hymn writers have to say about it. You read again this fourth chapter of the letter to the Hebrews, and you see "We who have believed do enter into that rest". Some of us have already entered in, says the Apostle. God defines a day - it is not the future - and some of us do enter in. This rest is not a time period, it is a state, and the Apostle says here so clearly that entering into rest is simply a matter of entering into a settled faith in God. You know quite well that however doctrinal and technical this may seem, it is very true. We

can prove it almost any day of our lives. When we get to the place where we put ourselves and what we would like on one side and accept the Lord's will - not just resignedly saying Well, if that is what the Lord wants, I capitulate; if I could have it otherwise, I would, but this is evidently what the Lord wants: but if with all our heart we accept it and enter into this with the Lord to co-operate with Him, when we come there, rest enters into our souls, our souls come to rest, on all sorts of things, small and great.

(b) Power with God

Then victory comes because faith is power. If the Word of God is strong and clear about one thing, it is about this. Oh, faith is power. First of all, it is power with God. What is more powerful with God than to be well-pleasing to Him, and that is why I read about Enoch. "By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and he was not found because God translated him: for he hath had witness borne to him that before his translation he had been well-pleasing unto God". That is all centred in, and made to rest upon, faith. "Without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing unto him". Surely that is our ambition above all - to be well-pleasing unto Him. How? - to believe Him, to trust Him, to repose faith in Him, to be well-pleasing unto Him. It is power with God. We can consider that along the other line, that our weakness with the Lord is always found in our reservation, our question, our doubt, our uncertainty. That is our weakness with God, and the Lord waits.

(c) Power over Satan

It is victory over the Devil because, if there is one thing that is the playground of the Devil, it is unbelief, and if there is one thing that the Devil is always seeking to promote and maintain, it is unfaith. The hallmark of the Devil's work from the Garden to the end is unbelief, doubt of God, to question about God and God's ways - and God's motives. That is where the Devil is coming all the time - with an 'if'. If this and if that. If God were what He says He is, then this would not be. You know the thousands of 'ifs' and 'buts' of the Devil. The only power of victory over the Devil is faith in God. We can use the language of victory and power over Satan and it counts for nothing. We must have a new position of power over the enemy. The key is faith; it may be faith in the Blood, or in the Name, or in the Lord, but it is faith.

(d) Power over the World

It is power over the world. "This is the victory that hath overcome the world, even our faith" (1 John 5:4). The world in this sense is that whole system and order and atmosphere and attitude of things which must have been seen, and the present. What is the mark of the world? It must see, it must have now. Anything that is unseen and not present is utterly outside of the mentality of the world, and we know how much of the world there is in our nature and the battle is there. Faith overcomes that world that is in our own natures and around us. "The things which are seen are temporal: but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18). Faith has to do with those things.

We could talk for many hours on the matter of faith. Please do not think I am laying down the law to you. God knows the battle in all of our hearts on this matter and how true we know this to be in our own experience. We simply talk to one another solemnly. We shall always have to fall down before Him and say, Lord, increase our faith! There will be many times when we shall say, Lord, I have not faith for that, I have not faith to face this, to accept this. It is a matter of a new dealing with the Lord on this question of faith. There is the fact, it has to be faced, to be settled, to be resolved again and

again. Everything depends upon it - the Victory in every realm, going on with the Lord, getting through to what God has purposed. It is all this matter of faith in God, and thereby being well-pleasing unto Him. "He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after him" (Heb. 11:6). Lord, increase our faith!