

“Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith.” (Habakkuk 2:4)

I was recently asked by a couple of folks “how do we exercise our faith and make it grow?” The genesis of the question comes from statements that have been made from this pulpit over the years by various people about doing this or that thing to thereby exercise our faith. It is a good question and an interesting thing to consider. As I studied and worked to develop an answer, I went down an unexpected path that I hope has produced something useful to you.

Faith of course is a topic of great consideration throughout Scripture. Some expositors will argue that the entire point of the New Testament is to teach us of faith. Some of these expositors also put forth a very adamant position that there is somehow a difference in the faith expressed by Old and New Testament followers of God; that because the Law was in effect before Christ, the faith that was expressed in their obedience to the law is something different than the faith expressed through belief in Christ Jesus. It is sometimes called faith in the law and faith in Christ. Barnes, for example, says about Habakkuk 2:4, in his exposition of Romans 1:17 (one of the places where Habakkuk is quoted):

“This did not refer primarily to the doctrine of justification by faith, nor did the apostle so quote it, but it expressed a general principle that those who had confidence in God should be happy, and be preserved and blessed.”

I find this exposition falls short, and tends to promote the idea that the Gospel of Christ is not universal across the ages. The Gospel of Christ was very much a part of the Mosaic dispensation, and we mustn't forget that.

“Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.” (Hebrews 13:8)

The justification of Old Testament believers didn't come from a different source, i.e., their sacrificial works, but through faith just as ours does. Faith in the Old Testament didn't just supply some sort of amorphous happiness, or garner them some sort of temporal caretaking by God. No offense to Brother Barnes, but he's just plain wrong, in my opinion.

When speaking to Habakkuk, the Lord is describing the only two distinct classes of people who have ever walked the earth – the unjust and the just. The unjust, or those whose soul “is lifted up” and thereby they live by the idea that they can justify themselves via their “good” works, and him who “shall live by his faith”.

The just live by their faith, not only in this life, but in the next. They are, as Barnes says, certainly blessed, provided with happiness and provided for by their Father, but their faith is also the means by which they overcome death and gain eternal life. This is the core element of faith – that His people will obtain these things. The product of

faith is what allows them to deal with the affliction and persecution of this life without being crushed by them – that product being patience.

“Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.” (James 1:3)

And also consider this:

“For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister. And we desire that every one of you do shew the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end: That ye be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” (Hebrews 6:10-12)

And of course this:

“Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise.” (Hebrews 10:35-36)

The end of the patience of the just who live by faith, is of course eternal life. It is by faith's patient work that we may receive the end of this promise. Faith creates the patience that enables us to reach the desired end, i.e., that we live eternally at the right hand of God.

So then, if we must show “diligence to the full assurance of hope” and “be not slothful” in regard to our following of Christ, does it stand to reason that we can exercise and thereby grow our faith?

I say no, it doesn't. Faith cannot be exercised as a muscle to be grown, for then faith would be a work of our own devising. James tells us that faith is shown by our works, but he does not say faith is in itself a work that we can exercise or create by our own works and effort.

Faith is not a work, but it is also not just a simple hope or belief. It is much more than that. James instructs us as much when he tells us

“Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.” (James 2:19)

Just believing there is a God is not faith if the devils can do the same and have no hope delivered to them by that belief; the devils have nothing produced by their belief, because it is a simple belief of a fact. Believing the facts right in front of your face doesn't produce the patience that faith does. Faith is interested in things that aren't immediately seen, as we'll look at a little more later.

But, you might say, do we not make a profession of faith? Don't we have to be willing to and take action to profess our faith? Isn't that a creating moment? Absolutely we make a profession:

“Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;)” (Hebrews 10:23)

But a profession of faith is not the same as the creation of or an increase in faith – it is a simple declaration of what already is there. The exhortation here to hold it fast intimates that it can be lost, and that it requires strength, focus, and desire to hold onto it. It is not something to assume will always be experienced equally in every trial and tribulation. Just because during a particular trial we experience a strong onset of faith does not mean that in the very next trial our faith will show itself at the same strength or in the same fashion. Consider Peter as an example of this. One moment he is professing his faith with great emphasis

“Peter said unto him, Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee. Likewise also said all the disciples.” (Matthew 26:35)

And not long thereafter,

“Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew.” (Matthew 26:74)

He failed this trial of his faith in a most sorrowful, pitiable and terrifying way. Of course we are no different. Our faith ebbs and flows as we trust in God and as He provides it to us. We cannot provide it to ourselves, we cannot nurture it or facilitate it. Peter shows us that no matter how vociferous our claim to faith is in any given moment, the unknowns of the next can wipe away all that confidence if we do not submit ourselves to the Lord for our strength. Our faith exists only in whatever amount God gives it to us and we must say, as the Apostles said “unto the Lord, Increase our faith” (Luke 17:5).

You'll notice there that they didn't ask Him “what must we do to increase our faith”, as they did when they asked Him to teach them to pray. This is an acknowledgement that their works could do nothing for their faith. Jesus is, after all, the “author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2). That author and finisher is a phrase that carries in it the idea of greater than complete completeness; it also carries in it an allusion to finishing a thing created by your hands, like a cabinet. He's responsible not only for the building of our faith, but all the little intricate details that go along with finishing it until it is one hundred percent complete. Our faith was created by and is infused into us by Christ, and He will see to the finishing, or completion of it. By implication He is responsible for everything relating to it that is in between its authorship and finishing as well. Faith is a grace of God, freely given to us, not a work of our hearts, minds or hands.

Consider also the profession of faith. That is clearly a work of our hearts and lips, yes?

“Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses.” (1 Timothy 6:12)

Think of all the seemingly sincere, heartfelt professions of faith we’ve heard from individuals in this place. People who have made drastic life changes after purportedly reading from the Word or hearing us expound it and having their hearts changed in them. People who put their hands to work here only to fall away, the ground not bearing the fruit of faith. This provides further evidence that faith does not come from a desire in us, or just a bare belief in God’s existence, but from God Himself. Unless the ground be fruitful, the seed will not take hold, and patience cannot come forth as the work of faith.

If faith were of works, then we as sinners would be justified by our own doings, the work of our own hands, making grace of no effect.

“And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work.” (Romans 11:6)

Our faith is definitely tried, but being tried is not the same as our exercising it. Going for a run in the morning exercises your ability to run fast, having a dog chase after you trying to take bite out of you tries your ability to run fast. There is a distinct difference. When Job sat amongst the ashes, his faith was not being exercised, it was being tried. Growth can come out of both events, and as I referenced before, James tells us

“...the trying of your faith worketh patience.” (James 1:3)

Patience to endure affliction from God comes through these trials of our faith, whether those trials are little ones, big ones, public ones, private ones, physical, mental, spiritual or all of the above. The faith required to withstand the trial is commensurate with the trial itself, but our faith is not grown by trial. When we have faith in God, and we endure the trial, our patience is worked, and by extension, grown, so that the next trial we endure more patiently. God provides His people such faith as is needed to get through their trials, no more, no less. We do not all have the same faith in strength, amount, purity, etc., but we all have that which we’ve been given, just as any other gift. Faith that we have today may not be the same faith that we had yesterday or that we will have tomorrow.

Examine Matthew 14 with me, starting at verse 22:

“And straightway Jesus constrained his disciples to get into a ship, and to go before him unto the other side, while he sent the multitudes away. And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone. But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves: for the wind was contrary. And in the fourth

watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear. But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid. And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water. And he said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus. But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me. And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?" (Matthew 14:22-31)

Peter is again an example of this provision of faith, and how we fail in its use from one minute to the next. He makes his profession of faith, leaving the confines of a perfectly good boat to go walk on the water, at the command of Jesus no less, which took faith. He's a fisherman. He knows what happens to people in the water, especially ones who leave the confines of a perfectly good boat that is in the "midst of the sea". However, he acts on faith, that since Christ called him onto the water, he will be preserved from sinking. That faith is tried with a little bit of wind, though, and it fails him. Christ teaches us many things here, not the least of which is that faith in Christ's power to save us from ourselves as well as our enemies is of infinite power. But also that faith is a thing that is an ongoing expression. Peter jumped out of the boat and the water held him, so how is that some bit of wind would make him sink?

How frequently in our lives do we experience similar situations? We see a thing where we must be bold, walking in the faith of Christ to undertake and perform it in His name, a battle to be fought to glorify His throne, and in the midst of the tribulation of it, we falter or fail entirely, having looked to our own strength to win the day or preserve us? I believe part of the reason this story exists is to teach us to expect these failures, but to learn from them. To allow our patience in tribulation to grow, and to show us the need to cast away doubt, to grow the ceiling of our patience for the next trial or tribulation.

Are we not promised

"There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." (1 Corinthians 10:13)

This word translated temptation here means adversity, including trials of our faith. We are never going to be put into a situation where our faith cannot aid us in getting out of it. That is the promise, and a magnificent promise it is. It is a great gift that we are able to receive these trials and testings of our faith that then grow our patience, allowing us to operate with greater patience in the next test.

But what is this faith exactly? It is clearly a very important element of our following God. What is the purpose of faith, if we cannot grow it or create it in ourselves? How does one know they have it? To me, faith is one of the most interesting areas of study, because it requires, more than almost anything, for us to submit and be content with what God will show us and work in us.

God doesn't leave things hanging out there without some help provided for us by His word, which is one of the things we have faith in – that His will is revealed to us in regard to those things which He has determined are important for us to know.

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”
(Hebrews 11:1)

This is one of those rare instances where we have a term's definition provided for us directly in Scripture, and if you break this passage down it reveals some fruitful findings.

“Now faith”

This points back to chapter 10 – which is a small treatise on some of the elements of faith in and of itself – but most specifically this points back to

“Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him. But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul.” (Hebrews 10:38-39)

This of course is a quote of and reference to Habakkuk 2:4. Those who “draw back” are those who withdraw from the active scene of battle to take refuge in the castle or tower built by their own hands rather than engaging and calling upon God to deliver them in a time of trouble. It is one of the things wrapped up in

“And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” (Genesis 11:4)

They wanted to build a tower to protect themselves from a future cataclysmic flood, having no faith in God's declaration and promise that

“neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth” (Genesis 9:11).

The rebellion demonstrated here begins with a lack of faith toward God, His promises and His unchanging nature. Drawing back isn't just a thing done out of fear or a display of cowardice. It is fundamentally a faith in your own hands, your own strength, your own power, your own creativity to work out of a situation instead of a patient waiting upon God to show you what to do, what your next move is, etc.

“Substance”

This is a tremendous word. The English translation here actually does a wonderful job in establishing our understanding, providing us assurance that faith isn't just our imagination on overdrive. There is actual substance to it. I can't tell you precisely what that substance looks like, what shape it takes, what color it is or how it smells. But it's a substance. It has depth, consistency, and presence. The word in Greek is Strong's 5287, which means a "setting under for support" just as Sam described faith as being our foundation some time back.

Faith is a thing that we can grab ahold of, establish ourselves on top of and stand upon relying upon it for absolute support. It can hold as much weight as God allows it to hold, and He has established it to hold precisely the amount of trial He requires it to. We may believe our faith has failed us at this or that time, but remember that nothing of God fails. It accomplishes precisely what it is intended to accomplish. Faith is a mysterious thing, but not a thing without substance and only in our minds.

"Of things hoped for"

Our faith is the substance of those things we hope for. To hope for a thing in this context means to have a reasonable expectation of it. The substance of our faith is what gives us the reasonable expectation that the eternal rest we hope for is real. It fills us and provides us with the comfort that our expectations of reward for patient service and worship of God are reasonable and will be fulfilled. Even while our lives here on earth are full of tribulation, this faith provides for us irrefutable assurance that a more enduring citizenship await us, where our High Priest has gone as a forerunner. Our faith tells us that we should shortly expect entrance into that rest.

Our faith is more than just the substance of this, though. It is definitely more than that.

"The evidence of things not seen"

Evidence is a strong word. Stronger than substance. While we say a thing is a substance, or has substance, that substance can be an unknown. That green gloop on the dinner plate has and is a substance, but it is not evidence of nutrition or that it won't kill you if you eat it. Evidence is tangible and demonstrable and should objectively prove a thing is a certain way.

Now, we can't directly see faith, even though it is the substance of things hoped for. But it provides evidence that other things exist which we cannot see. Not just evidence of those things that we hope for, but of things that have occurred before time began. Our faith is the evidence to us that in the council halls of eternity, the Trinity came to their agreement to provide for a remnant to be preserved, a redeemer to pay for their sins and His righteousness to be imputed to them.

So how is our faith evidence if we can't see it? That is an interesting thing to consider, because the word evidence provides a more tangible, understandable construct for us

than just substance. A thing can have substance and still not be understandable to a person. Substance isn't necessarily evidence that provides proof.

This is one of those times when I think science provides us an interesting analog. It's not an exact parallel, but I spent a lot of time trying to come up with a way to practically understand this idea, and I think black holes might provide something we can wrap our minds around, so humor me a second. In astronomy, we know that black holes exist, even though we can't see them with the naked eye or with telescopes that use any technology available today. So how do we know there are black holes? We look at the things around them and see them behaving in a way that they can't possibly behave unless a black hole is present. Gravity works differently, light works differently, the visual and non-visual spectrums work differently than they do in "normal" space. Therefore, something is there. There is evidence that there is an unseen body of some sort present in various parts of space that is directly, physically impacting things that we can see. That something we've named a black hole and given it certain properties. Again, I know it's not an exact parallel, but the concept I think helps frame the idea I'm expressing.

Our faith is similar in that it is a substance that provides in our hearts and minds an undeniable evidence that there is something more to this life than man evolving out of a primordial soup and hurling through space and time toward some uncertain annihilation. We don't have to fully understand the substance of faith to know that it has an impact on us and effects what we do. We don't have to be able to fully explain what that substance is, but recognizing it as a work of God in us and being thankful for it shows it. Our works demonstrate that it exists.

Faith is a real thing that is present in God's people. It has substance. It gives us something to look at to more closely understand its existence, and understand and shore up our belief in all the things we cannot see but hold to be true and present in our lives. God didn't just leave us hanging in this matter, either, He left us plenty of direct evidence that absolutely (if you have faith) proves His existence, even though you can't see Him:

*"Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear."
(Hebrews 11:3)*

You want proof of faith, proof of God, proof of heaven and hell, judgment and justification, angels and the devil? Look around you! Acceptance of the evidence that is right in front of your eyes is an exemplary gift of faith from God. If you can't see the evidence, you have no faith and no hope! If you deny the evidence, it's even worse for you. Acknowledging the existence of God isn't faith, as I've said before, but seeing the Creation and acknowledging God's dictation, control, design and execution of it is absolutely an expression of faith, when it acknowledges Christ and His role in it.

This faith plays a vital role in the disposition of our immortal souls, for by it we are justified in the eyes of God

“...the just shall live by his faith” (Habakkuk 2:4)

But what is justification? What does it mean to be just? Many preachers use this verse to make the case that you can basically reverse engineer yourself into heaven. The argument goes that you do good works, and that shows you have faith, and if you have faith, you are just, and that means you go to heaven if you work at soup kitchens and homeless shelters and go on mission trips to the deepest jungles of Borneo.

That’s not what it means to be just. That isn’t faith, and those aren’t works that demonstrate faith.

Put simply, justification is the only way any son or daughter of Adam could ever hear the words

“...Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 25:34)

Without being justified, we cannot inherit the kingdom, because we will be seen as the guilty sinners we are by God at the Judgement. That is what it means to be justified – to be seen as Christ is seen in the eyes of God and to never be put on trial for our sins.

Our justification by faith cannot be in the eyes of men. This is where many so-called Christians falter, especially in their regard of those verses that quote Habakkuk in the New Testament. They seek to justify themselves in the eyes of men by putting works on display and calling them holy and good. It is easy to be seen as innocent in the eyes of other guilty men, especially if you do things they like to call “good”. Everyone inside a prison has been wrongfully accused and is completely innocent, after all. Workers of iniquity see no guilt in their sin, and see only an unjust God who would judge them for their sins.

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.” (Matthew 23:27-28)

This isn’t just about the scribes and Pharisees, this applies to all men. People work constantly to appear righteous and holy in all manner of things, while they secretly and sometimes not so secretly, commit abominable acts. Think of what we see every day, people all around us trying to look like they’re “good people” who live steeped in the filthiest of sins imaginable. This justification is in the sight of God, in whose sight we cannot be justified by our works, even if we were to keep every whit of the law our whole lives:

“Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.” (Romans 3:20)

The just, who live by faith, are not made righteous by some supernatural injection of righteousness, either, which is important. There is no change in the fundamental nature of those who live by faith. There is nothing that can make us righteous, including our faith. There is imputation of Christ’s righteousness, but that is not the same thing as us **being made** righteous through this justification. Justification by faith doesn’t suddenly take a fallen sinner and make them un-fallen. Our depraved and natural state will not change, it cannot change. All that can happen in regard to this vile, filthy nature is how God sees us in it – when He looks at us, does He see us in our natural state, or does He impute Christ’s righteousness to us and thereby justify us as redeemed and our sins paid for by the blood of Jesus Christ?

To put it another way, when we are faithful, when we profess our faith before God and men, we are not made just through that faith or its profession. In this context, being just or justified is not a physical state of being, it is more of a rhetorical one, if you will. By our faith we are not made pure or holy, rather we are relieved from condemnation under the law, faith and justification coming from the holiness and purity of the blood of Christ.

Justification is not pardon from sin. Pardon is a distinct and unique grace of God all on its own, and a different function that Christ performs for us. Pardon frees us from punishment and our obligation to pay a price for our sin. Pardoning us from sin acknowledges the crime of our sins but judicially sets aside the guilt and expected punishment for them. Christ’s blood paid the sacrificial price required for pardon. Christ’s blood alone does not provide righteousness to us through justification, however. The appropriate analogy is that of removing the filthy rags of our naturally depraved state and clothing us in righteousness. These are two distinct and separate things.

“And he shewed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to resist him. And the LORD said unto Satan, The LORD rebuke thee, O Satan; even the LORD that hath chosen Jerusalem rebuke thee: is not this a brand plucked out of the fire? Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and stood before the angel. And he answered and spake unto those that stood before him, saying, Take away the filthy garments from him. And unto him he said, Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment. And I said, Let them set a fair mitre upon his head. So they set a fair mitre upon his head, and clothed him with garments. And the angel of the LORD stood by.” (Zechariah 3:1-5)

To take the filthy garments is only the first piece. Without the robe of righteousness, we stand naked, which of course is an utterly inappropriate way to stand before a King. Moreover, if we stand naked before Him, we still are not guiltless; we've only removed the rags of our own personal unrighteousness. Our natural depravity is a filthy offense to Him, carrying the sin of Adam. Those rags that are removed are those things we have added to that sinfulness in our lives. It is not enough to stand before our King pardoned, but we must stand before Him justified as well, robed in the righteousness of Christ, which His taking on the human frame, obeying the law in perfection, and eventually suffering unto death provides us.

This distinction between pardon and justification is important for us to properly understand the fulfilling of the law. Christ came to fulfill the law and all its wrath in our stead. Pardon does not fulfill the law, it sets it aside. While it is absolutely the prerogative of God the Father to set aside the justice of the law and pardon whomever He pleases for whatever reason He pleases, pardon does not impute righteousness, and Christ brought righteousness to His people, clothing them in it:

“I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels.” (Isaiah 61:10)

This righteousness is imputed to us by Christ (which is His to give), where pardon is granted by God the Father (which is His to give). Again, two very different things. An innocent person cannot be pardoned, but they can be justified. To impute Christ's righteousness to us means God sees us as He sees Christ, and Christ has afforded that protection or change in our visage. It does not fundamentally change us into a holy and righteous creature, because that is not how we were created; instead, it covers us in His righteousness. God's pardoning of our guilt is a gift He affords us in His mercy, having mercy on whom He chooses. We attain both of these – pardon and justification – but we cannot attain pardon through faith. Our faith is not an indicator of pardon. Our faith however, is an indicator of our being justified through Christ, in whom we express this faith.

While our faith may wax and wane with difficulties and under the weight of affliction, the righteousness of Christ imputed to us does not. This which is imputed to us is imputed permanently to His remnant. By imputing Christ's righteousness to us, God accomplishes His own righteousness in the redeeming of His children:

“For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.” (Romans 1:17)

And that is where we can take great comfort in our shortcomings and frailties. Though we, as Peter, may from time to time show a lack of faith in our God to protect us,

deliver us, provide for us, etc., the imputation, the clothing of us in righteousness will not falter or fail. We won't be seen as more or less righteous based upon the level of faith we individually express at any one given time. If you look at the rest of Hebrews 11, and you examine the souls who are held up as examples of faith, I believe you can begin to get this sense. Time fails us to have me go into a deep examination of each of these souls, but if we look at them in general, you see a very common theme. Each one of them is provided as an example of faith, even though we probably can all point out and discuss where there were many failings of their faith. Those failings didn't change the fundamental imputation of Christ's righteousness to them. They are righteous souls, the faithful believers in God and His promises. That's all He sees in them.

That is the hope we have as well, that He will see us as He sees all of His saints – not as a filthy, vile, disobedient sinner, but as a faithful follower who believes in Him, loves Him and seeks His favor and blessing as the Almighty and Sovereign God of all.

I set out to answer what I thought was a pretty simple question about faith, and ended up realizing I don't really know much about it. I don't think I've scratched the surface of this issue, but I've exhausted what I think I can properly say on it, so I'm going to stop here and perhaps return to other elements of faith and justification another day. I hope I opened some element up to someone today, and am grateful for you allowing me to conduct this service.