

Three Signs of Having the True Faith

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May God grant you all much grace and peace through the knowledge of God and Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus!

Not to know whether one has the true faith and stands in the grace of God is surely a terrible and miserable state. Yet there are countless numbers of men who do not know. They are not eager to know, either. They merely hope so, uncertainly, or even must assume the contrary.

But is it not awful not to know whether He is gracious toward us who created us, who redeemed us, to whom we therefore belong twice over? Is it not awful not to know His grace who must preserve us and on whom we are entirely dependent for everything? Is it not awful not to know His grace into whose hands we are irrevocably committed when our soul leaves our body and arrives in eternity? Is it not awful not to know His grace who has the power to help or destroy us in time and in eternity?

How is it possible for a man who is not sure of God's grace to lie down calmly at night? Must he not think, what will become of me if I died this night?

How can such a man awaken in the morning with joy? Must he not fear to enter a day without blessing and full of misery?

How can such a man be eager to start working? Must he not fear that his work will be under a curse?

How can such a man be glad when he is doing well? Must he not fear that God might grant him earthly welfare from wrath?

How can he comfort and recover himself when in need and trouble? Must he not look upon it as a punishment?

How can he be calm when faced with many enemies? Must he not believe that God will make him fall into their hands and be shamefully defeated?

How can he be resigned to bear illnesses which are his lot? Must he not think that God is about to abandon him completely, using him as the example of a man about to experience God's wrath since he had despised God's grace?

How horrible the signs of death must be to such a one! Must he not expect that they are also signs of eternal rejection and separation from God's presence?

Truly we might be amazed that a man who does not know whether he stands in the grace of God is not terrified of every leaf rustling in the breeze. We are amazed when he can still lift up his face to heaven without terror, can still read or hear God's word, enter the house of worship, use the holy sacraments and open his mouth for prayer or song.

Oh, dear listeners who are here without having a gracious God in heaven, do recognize how completely miserable you still are. Do not go one step further without having sought and found God's grace!

On the other hand we cannot imagine a happier man than him who knows that he stands in the grace of God. He can lie down at night with joy, for he knows he is resting in the Father's - his God's - arms who appoints His angels to watch over him. He awakens with joy, for he knows that God kept him in order to grant him new grace in this newly granted day. With joy he exercises his profession and calling, for he knows God is with him. With joy he sees his earthly blessings, for he knows God wants to gladden him in them.

He meets troubles in comfort and courage. For he knows God wants to lead him to heaven on this road. Without fear he sees himself surrounded with secret and manifest enemies, for he knows he need not fear them at all. Without God's will they cannot hurt a hair on his head, for God is with him. Gladly he lies on the bed of illness God prepared for him, for he hopes that there, too, he will be able to think, speak and act to the glory of God.

Learning of his approaching death is good news to him. For he knows

*How good to dwell in heaven, It only I hold dear;
God will reward forever His faithful servants here.*

With joy he opens his Bible, for in it he finds light, strength, comfort and peace.

With joy he enters the house of worship, for his soul rejoices in the beautiful services of the Lord. With joy and gladness of his heart he joins in the communal songs and prayers, and partaking of Holy Communion gives him a day of celebration.

Oh, how wonderful it would be, therefore, if we all knew that we stood in the true faith, and thus in the grace of God! Would not that be heaven on earth despite all earth's manifold cares? Absolutely!

Now, beloved, since we are today offered the opportunity to examine our faith and our standing in grace, let us seize this opportunity and eagerly consider the signs showing whether we stand in the true faith or not.

Scripture text: I Corinthians 15:1-10.

Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: After that, he was seen of about five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am; and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all; yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.

As already mentioned elsewhere, there had arisen heretics in the local church at Corinth who sought to spread the Saduccean doctrine that there is no resurrection of the dead. To his great sorrow St. Paul had to see that several Corinthian Christians had indeed fallen for this fundamental error, while others had been made to doubt the true doctrine.

To set them straight again is the purpose of our text.

Here the apostle shows the victims of false teaching that the Christian doctrines hang together like a chain. Not one link may be taken from this chain without tearing it apart entirely. They must either reject the faith implanted in them and which they had accepted, or they must also accept the doctrine that there is a resurrection of the dead.

Here the apostle lists three signs of a true and well-founded faith. From this I would present to your love at this time

THREE IMPORTANT SIGNS OF HAVING THE TRUE FAITH.

They are:

1. When our Faith is Founded upon God's Word Alone;
2. When it is Joined to a Living Experience of the Heart; and
3. When it is Manifested by a New Holy Mind and Life.

{Prayer:} Oh Thou eternal and living God, who hast told us in Thy Holy Word, "Without faith it is impossible to please Thee" (Hebrews 11:6), do preserve us from the darkness of unbelief.

Keep us also lest we deceive ourselves with a mere pretense of faith. Kindle this heavenly light in our souls so that we may go on from faith to blessed sight, for the sake of Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son, our Lord. Amen.

[1. True Faith Must be Founded upon God's Word Alone]

Beloved listeners, when the holy apostle seeks to persuade the Corinthians in our text of having planted the true faith in them, he says, "For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day, according to the scriptures." Twice he says that in everything he laid the foundation with "the scriptures." From this we see that the first sign of having the true faith is this, that our faith is founded upon God's Word alone.

To recall this is especially necessary in our days. About seventy years ago (1771) there was such an apostasy in Christendom that for forty years one heard the preaching of the faith hardly anywhere. Instead of the doctrine of faith nothing but a barren, pagan moralistic doctrine was heard from most pulpits, especially in Germany. During the last decades, however, things have changed somewhat. Especially since 1817 many began to preach of faith again. Yes, in our new country the great majority of readers and listeners confess that faith is indeed necessary for salvation. But we must on no account be deceived by this confession. For not everything now being advertised and sold under this name is faith.

It is not true that so many have now returned to the faith of the Reformation. It is true that true believers can fall into errors. But where one errs knowingly, or considers errors mere trifles and innocuous, or knowingly professes errors of others, there is no true faith. No true faith exists where one is careless or indifferent as to whether the doctrine is certain or uncertain, true or false. No true faith exists where one differs knowingly from one single word of God.

God does not barter. He is not pleased when we accept only some few things of His Holy Word which seem acceptable to our reason and right to our feelings. Whoever thinks himself unable to accept every least jot or tittle of the Holy Scriptures rejects them entirely.

Whoever will not accept the Old Testament as God's Word rejects also the New, for the New Testament is founded upon the Old. He who denies the damnation of original sin, the existence of the devil, the eternity of the torments of hell, does not believe in Christ either. For Christ said all this Himself clearly and distinctly.

You may frequently read in the Holy Scriptures and consider them a fine, uplifting book of comfort. But while you are still picking and choosing from it, and think in your heart that it contains much which the apostles and prophets may be excused to have believed in their simplicity, but which we moderns can't be expected to accept just as it is -- do not fancy in any way that there might be the least little spark of true faith in your heart! With all your pretended faith you are then nothing but an unbelieving, proud spirit who does not want to be a humble student, but a teacher and judge of the Word of the eternal God. You then think yourself wiser than Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, the eternal Truth and Wisdom. For Christ Himself proved His entire teaching by the Scriptures and always said even in His fight against the tempter, "It is written, it is written." Therefore Isaiah also says, "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light," that is, no Christ, "in them." (Isaiah 8:20).

True saving faith can only be where you have truly received the living knowledge, by the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, that the Holy Scriptures, both the Old and the New Testament, is the revealed Word of the highest God, according to which some day all will be judged, either acquitted or condemned. Where there is true faith, men are filled with the deepest awe of the Holy Scriptures. David says in Psalm 119 that he was afraid of God and His judgments so that his flesh trembled. (Psalm 119:120). Isaiah says that the Lord will look to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at His word. (Isaiah 77:2).

Where there is true faith men will not depart knowingly from one letter of Holy Writ. They will rather give up goods, honor, blood and life. A single word of the Scriptures is worth more to a true believer than all wisdom and pronouncements of all the wise men of this world. One who has the true faith never asks, "How is this possible?" But for him the only decisive question is, "What is written? How do you read?" When he has a clear word of God for any doctrine, he accepts it humbly no matter how his reason, his heart, his feelings might resist. But whatever is contradictory to the clear Word of God, he rejects securely as delusion and lies, no matter how probable it may sound. He bases everything upon the Word of God. If one part of Scripture is against him, he cannot be comforted even if all the world calls him blessed. But if God's Word approves him, then nothing can disturb him though all the world or even his own heart condemns him. His motto is: "Although my heart calls me a fool, the Word of God shall keep the rule."

*By grace, defying sin and devil,
I raise the banner of the faith,
Despite all doubts, despite all evil,
To Thee, O Lord, I cling till death.
Believing Thou Thy Word wilt keep
I walk to Canaan through the deep.*

Examine yourselves, beloved hearers! Do you, too, hold God's Word so dear, high and holy? Are you, too, ready rather to lose your life than to depart in one letter from the purity of God's Word? Are you not content with the mere *semblance* of truth? Is your faith, too, so firmly rooted and grounded in the Word of God that you trust in your salvation though all men rejected and condemned you?

Unfortunately among many the horrible plague is rampant that they do not want to become certain themselves of their faith, but first look upon others to see whether these others will recognize their faith or not. Seeing others glad, certain and secure in a different doctrine, they easily mistrust their own faith and fall in with others. Why? Because they are not sure of *their own* faith from God's Word. Oh you who always only look upon others, upon your counselors and those whom you consider good Christians, and who then comfort yourselves when they comfort you, consider that you will have to stand up for your own soul in that day! Your own salvation is at stake! If you allow yourselves to be deceived by others, you do so at your own risk.

In that day you will not be able to tell Christ that you believed as you did because this or that man, whom you thought a true, saved believer, confirmed you in your belief. Christ will answer you, Did I point you to men? Did I not also give you My Word, and exhort you, "Search the Scriptures, for they are they which testify of me"? (John 5:39). Why did you not take your stand on my Word? You see, you rejected my Word, so now I must reject you! Cursed is the man who trusteth in man! (Jeremiah 17:5). Depart from me, I never knew you, you evildoer.

[2. True Faith is Joined in a Living Experience of the Heart]

But, beloved, a second sign of having the true faith is this, that it is joined to a living experience of the heart.

St. Paul points us to this when he says to the Corinthians in our text, "*Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you.*"

Here, dearly beloved, you have a glorious description of truly believing Christians. The apostle says of them that they have *received* the gospel and *stand* in it.

We must thoroughly consider that these are not the words of men, but words of the Holy Spirit, speaking through the apostle. But God's words are deep, rich and of vast meaning.

Ah, dear Christian, when you hear the Corinthians praised for having *received* and *standing* in the gospel, do not hurry so quickly past these expressions. Do not immediately conclude that you, too, can say this of yourself. Think rather what it means to have truly *received* and truly to *stand* in the gospel.

Many think that when they agree to what God's Word says, when they enjoy the beautiful teachings of the gospel, when they gladly and diligently hear and read God's Word, they already have received it. But it is possible to have a certain pleasure of God's Word, and yet to be full of enmity against it when it strikes home to the sensitive part of our heart.

We are told of Herod in Mark 6: "He feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly." (Mark 6:20). But when John the Baptist castigated him for his pet sin, he was killed by the executioner's axe of this seeming lover of the Word of God.

Thus all Germany once praised Luther's comforting doctrine, and yet we hear this man complain everywhere that his word was not received but rejected.

Thus, if you want to be sure of your faith, hear this. By nature no man is able to accept the gospel in his heart. He must be brought to do this by the Holy Spirit. For as often as an unconverted man hears the law of God, or reads or considers it, the Holy Spirit seeks to persuade him how great a sinner he is, and that he does not yet stand in God's grace, but that the wrath of God abides on him.

Now if this man, by God's working, does not resist the Holy Spirit, his heart is filled with a deep sadness, his awakened conscience brings him into fear and terror, and now by the gospel a heartfelt desire for grace, help and mercy is aroused in him.

Oh, how blessed is the man who experiences this! For this desire for grace is already a beginning of the true saving faith as soon as the sinner in his yearning reaches for Christ, the Reconciler of all sins.

If such a man remains under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, He finally brings him by the word of the gospel, from the desire for Christ to a believing and trusting embracing of Christ, so he can exclaim in divine certainty, "praise the Lord, oh my soul," for I, a sinner, have found grace; I, a miserable creature, have found mercy!

Take away all treasures! Thou art all my pleasure, Jesus, my desire.

All ambition's prizes Now my soul despises, Cleansed by God's own fire.

Trouble, need, cross, shame and death, Though I suffer much, will never, From my Lord, My Savior sever.

See, my dear ones, he who has experienced this, of him alone can it be said that he has accepted the gospel and has come to the true faith.

He who never felt the least pain of true repentance, who has not felt the power of the law and does not yet know how a sinner feels when he sees his condemned state by the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit and realizes himself to be a child of death; he who never sighed in real anguish of soul from the depth of his heart for the mercy of Christ, and never yet learned that one cannot believe in Christ by one's own strength, but that faith in Christ can only be given to us by God alone through His worthy Holy Spirit - such a one is certainly yet without true faith.

The birth of faith in the soul of a sinner does not come to pass in such a way that he himself is unaware of it. It is a work which changes the entire man. It brings him from darkness to light, from spiritual death to spiritual life, and from utter weakness to a divine strength.

On this, Luther gloriously speaks in his preface to the Epistle to the Romans: "*Upon hearing the gospel, many fall, and in their own strength make themselves a thought in their heart which says, I believe. Then they take this thought to be true faith. But as this is human imagination and thought which the innermost heart never experiences, it does not effect anything, and is not followed by any improvement. But faith is a work of God in us which changes and regenerates us in God, kills the Old Adam, makes us entirely different men in heart, courage, mind and all*

powers, and brings with it the Holy Spirit. - Pray God to work faith in you; otherwise you will remain eternally without faith, no matter what you want and are able to imagine and do."

Now examine yourselves accordingly, beloved.

Did you come to your faith on the road of such an experience? Are you able to testify to what God has wrought in your soul? Can you say from experience, If God had not granted faith to me, I could never have acquired it by myself? My faith is not a work of my nature, but a work of the Holy Spirit who called me by the gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in the true faith? - I am convinced that all true Christians among us could, in reply to this question, tell much more of the leading of their God, and how much it cost them before they came to certainty than could be mentioned here briefly.

But perhaps many a one among us does not know at all what to say. For perhaps he has made himself an idea in his heart, out of his own strength, which says, I believe, just as Luther says. And this he has taken to be the true faith up to now. Oh that such a one would first submit to the schooling of the Holy Spirit, let go his dead faith, and pray to God for the true faith. Otherwise he will surely remain without faith forever.

[3. True Faith is Manifested by a New, Holy Mind and Life]

But, beloved, perhaps one may have had these living experiences upon first hearing the gospel, yet no longer have similar experiences and have lost the faith. Thus, when the apostle wants to praise the Corinthians' faith, he not only says that they have accepted the gospel, but thirdly and lastly also that they are still *standing* in this gospel. By it they were saved, unless they had believed in vain.

When we now compare to these words the testimony of St. Paul about himself at the end of our text, we see that the third mark of standing in the true faith is this, that it is manifested in us by a new holy mind and life. Doubtless St. Paul stood in the true faith in Jesus Christ. How is this faith manifested in him?

Before his conversion he was proud and self-righteous. Now he is humble, calls himself one born out of due time, the least of the apostles. Yes, he says that he is not worthy to be called an apostle. Thus he considers all his earlier righteousness under the law as dung, and praises only the grace of his Savior.

Before, he was a persecutor of the church of God, but now in untiring preaching of the gospel he gathered holy churches in all countries to the praise and honor of Christ, so that he could say that he had worked more than they all.

Before he had led many souls astray. Now he sought to save all the more, and to bring them to Christ. He sought to prove himself a proper father in Christ, and a faithful shepherd of Christ's sheep.

Before, he had blasphemed Christ. Now he sought all the more to further the honor of Christ.

Before, in religious fanaticism, he had persecuted dissidents. Now he wished to be condemned by Christ in stead of his blinded brothers according to the flesh if he could save their souls by sacrificing his own. Here you see the picture of a Christian who not only has accepted the gospel but also still stands in it.

Honestly and earnestly examine yourselves accordingly.

Where there is true faith, it will also be manifested in a new life.

If you were proud and arrogant before, you will now be humble before God and men.
If you were miserly and money-loving, you will now be charitable and heavenly-minded.
If you were vain and worldly, you will now be self-denying and godly.
If you were unchaste and lustful, you will now be chaste and continent.
If you were angry and ill-tempered, you will now be kind and friendly.
If you were unfaithful and dishonest, you will now be faithful and conscientious.
If you were lukewarm and idle, you will now be zealous and diligent.
If you were careless and lazy in your earthly calling, you will now be careful and hard-working.
If you were full of jesting and foolery, your mouth will now be all the more full of the praise of God and edifying words.
If you used to murmur against God and were full of earthly cares, you will now be surrendered and full of trust toward your heavenly Father.
If you have served sin, the world and Satan diligently before, you will now serve all the more diligently righteousness, God and your savior.
For "if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." (II Cor. 5:17). "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature, and faith which worketh by love." (Galatians 6:15, 5:6).

Whoever among us can say with Paul, "*By the grace of God I am what I am; and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain;*" - I have a new heart and walk in a new life, - let him not lose heart in the great weakness of his flesh. Even though he must say with Paul, "*that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I*" (Romans 7:15) - let him persevere in fighting and not allow sin to rule him.

If here in the fight against sin grace in us is not in vain, then this is a sign for us that it will not be in vain either when we must appear before God's throne. Rather it will acquit us from all guilt, and open to us the door to eternal salvation. Amen.