

Living by Faith

by Charles Finney

The just shall live by faith, and faith is the essential condition of perfect society, both in this world and the world to come.

Scripture: Habakkuk 2:4, John 14:1, Romans 1:17, 2 Corinthians 5:7, Galatians 3:11, Ephesians 2:8-9, Philippians 4:6-7, Hebrews 10:38, James 2:19, 1 Peter 1:8-9

Topics: "Christian Living", "Faith"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes that the just shall live by faith, explaining that faith is not merely intellectual but a heartfelt trust in God. He illustrates how all people, including children and families, inherently rely on faith for daily life, while distinguishing between generic faith and the specific faith that Christians possess in Christ. This Christian faith leads to a life of obedience, submission, joy, and spiritual communion with God, ultimately shaping a believer's character and actions. Finney argues that true faith is essential for a fulfilling life, both on earth and in heaven, as it fosters peace, humility, and a sense of purpose.

Transcript

"The just shall live by faith." Habakkuk 2:4

These words which occur first in Habakkuk are quoted in Gal. 3:11 and again in Heb. 10:38. They express a great truth which has a specially rich and important development in the gospel.

I. I will first explain the sense in which all men live by faith; and

II. The sense in which the just live by faith.

I. Faith is not merely an intellectual state. It is more than a mere conviction or state of being convinced. We do not reach the radical idea till we get to the heart, and till we find in this term, faith, the heart's confidence--a trusting in which the heart reposes on the word or character of one deemed worthy of confidence. It is a phenomenon of the will--it being of necessity a thing of free choice whether we will or will not refuse confidence, it being supposed that the intelligence sees good reason for such confidence.

In its generic signification it may be applied to any thing in which we repose confidence. Any exercise of mind in which we yield it up to confide and to trust is faith.

All intelligent beings live by faith in some thing. Little children live by faith, and it is striking to observe how much this is true of them. Indeed unreflecting persons do not by any means conceive how universal this principle is and must be, and how necessary to the existence of social and sentient beings. Even little children must learn to have faith in the use of their muscles, else they would not venture to trust themselves upon their feet at all. Nor would any sane man eat his daily food but for faith. He has faith in his cook that she has not poisoned it. He must have faith that this food will do him good and will not kill him. Without faith men would not dare lie down to sleep. They must have some confidence in their fellow beings that they will be permitted to sleep without being murdered. In fact men would not dare to do any thing which implies peaceful repose unless they lived by faith. Without faith, there could be no repose of mind--nothing but sleepless and intense solicitude. In this state no man could live. His very solitudes would wear out his nerves and crush down his physical system.

All families must live by faith, or rather they could not live without it. Even a pirate ship could not be managed without it. An old adage says--"There is honor among thieves;" and obviously, if there were not, there could be no such thing as organized thievishness, or association in mischief of any sort. They who need the help or sympathies of others in their enterprise must of necessity live by faith.

It is astonishing to see how much faith there is in every thing. Look at men any where in any relations;--you see them living by faith. If you, young people, had not faith, you would not be trying to get an education. Society could not get along in any form it may assume, without faith. Farmers would neither plant nor sow; nobody would bestow labor for the sake of future good results; nothing could be done,--without faith. If faith should utterly cease, the race must perish. You would be surprised, if you were to reflect, to see how soon the entire race must perish if faith were to cease. Faith is the great secret of their being--the underlying condition of their continued existence.

Without faith we overcome no obstacles, for we make no efforts. And who does not know that we never accomplish anything useful without effort? All useful things then must go undone, if it were not for faith.--God has so constituted the universe that faith must be in exercise or its necessary processes must be arrested and ruin come down on all created beings.

On the other hand, in proportion as faith exists, society moves along admirably. An army, held together in strong and perfect discipline, owes its bond of strength to faith. A school well ordered, in diligence pursuing its noble work, lives by faith. A family, loving by promoting each others' interests, moving along with helpful labors and cares, have their central power in faith.

Of course I am speaking here only of faith in the generic, not the religious, sense. If confidence really exists, in all these multiform relations, then all goes right; all moves along smoothly. But if faith is lacking, every thing is wrong, necessarily and eternally so.

It is common for skeptics to sneer at christianity because it makes so much account of faith. They seem to assume that they have no need of faith, in anything. It would be easy to show that of all men, religious skeptics must be most credulous and must have most faith, of some sort. The chief peculiarity in their case is, that having rejected the light and the evidence of truth through their radical enmity of heart against it, they are shut up to the necessity of believing things without evidence and against evidence as their only resort. They are compelled to believe that to "leap into the dark" at death is the best ending of human life.

But I must pass from this subject and proceed to inquire,

II. What is religious faith?

It differs from other faith in its objects, but not essentially in its nature. But I ought first to say that christians have naturally faith like other men and women. They have the same faith in a general sense which is common to society and to human nature every where.

They have also more than this;--they have a christian faith, by which they live a christian life. The secret of this christian life is the faith they have in the Son of God. This faith "works by love." Their confidence in Christ, in all he says and does, weds their souls to him and begets unceasing love.

Their confidence in Christ's benevolence makes it a present reality to their souls, and hence the influence of such a presence of love cannot fail to inspire a corresponding love in their hearts towards Christ and his people, and indeed, towards all creatures. Thus they become conscious of both affectional and emotional love. Without confidence in God and in Christ, they could not live such a life of faith. The motive would be wanting. How could they have peace with God, except through faith in Christ's atonement as the ground of reconciliation? How could they walk in the strength of the Lord without faith in his exceedingly great and precious promises? How bring their hearts under the influence of all the great truths of the gospel, unless they have a religious faith in those truths?

Many christians complain of the lack of emotion in their religious exercises, but overlook the great reason of their deficiency. They do not seem to see that the fountain out of which proceeds the strong, deep, flow of emotion, is no other than faith. See that daughter. She is here at school; her dear mother is at home. She sits down to write to unbosom her soul. See how her faith in her mother's love opens the great fountain of her emotions. That mother's character is before her mind a present reality. She never can question the strength or the fulness of her mother's love. Hence when her attention turns to her mother, a thousand thoughts rush upon her mind, "and tears unbidden start."

Is it any wonder that a christian's faith should in like manner inspire his affections and quicken his emotion?

By faith, the just live a life of obedience. Faith works by love, and love inspires the heart to obey. Faith brings the soul into such union and harmony with God that love and obedience become a second nature. Nothing can be more easy and natural than to obey where there is love and faith. If you confide in your Heavenly Father you will of course try to please him.

Again, by faith, you will live a life of submission to all God's providences. Adverse providences will of course cross your path in this earthly state; but if you confide in your Heavenly Father, you will pass smoothly along, submissive and satisfied that he who rules all does all things well. Said a man to me, only the other day--I hold to this--that whatever occurs to me and mine will work for my good. If any loss befalls me, do I not know it shall be in some way for my gain? I know it must be. If one of my horses dies, it is all best. God will make it up in some spiritual good. Another man said to me--If I set my heart upon accomplishing any object, make efforts for it, and succeed, it is well; and if I do not succeed, then it is well. I know the failure must be better than the success, else God would have given me the success. Do I not know that He will give me the best thing? It does not follow that He was displeased with me for making the efforts which He saw it best to frustrate. He expects me to act according to my best light and judgment; then if He sees a still better way and frustrates my way, all is well. Now I ask you, how could these men feel this repose and this submission to God's providence without faith?

So a man learns to adjust himself to the providence of God, as a ship at sea on the tops of the bounding waves. If anything comes dashing across his path and blasting his plans, gradually by his faith in God he adjusts himself to the blast and sings, "all is well, for it is my Father!" He trains himself from his first conversion to this self-adjustment by faith, even as the infant on his new and untrained limbs, learns to balance himself on the center of gravity, gaining new skill by each day's practice, until you are surprised to see what evolutions he can make with the utmost apparent ease and safety. So in the Christian's life; the trustful Christian learns to adjust himself suddenly to the blasts that strike him under the vicissitudes of God's providence, and keep his mind upright and on its balance, however sudden may be the changes which pass over him. He learns to apply every where those great truths he has learned of God. He holds practically that all God does is best. Hence he can pass through trials with calm and heavenly resignation. He expects to come out at last as Jacob did. You recollect Jacob began with saying--"Joseph is dead, and Simeon is dead; and ye will take Benjamin away also; all these things are against me." Did man ever make a greater mistake? Joseph was not dead, but was sent onward to the granary of the world to provide means of subsistence not for Jacob's family only, but for the whole nations. Simeon was not dead. All these things were not against him but for him, in the highest sense; and the good old man lived to see how sadly he had misinterpreted the ways of God towards himself and his house. So the fierce blast smites many a soul, and the poor man, weak in faith, staggers under the blow and trembles through great fear; but soon he gathers up his confidence, and lifting his head above the surging billows, he cries out, All is well! What though the lightnings flash and the thunders roar; what though darkness and storm combine their terrors; why shall he tremble? Is not God on the throne, high above and over all?

So the Christian lives exempt from care, bearing his burdens without distraction because he rolls them over upon the Lord. In the midst of business ever so complicated, his mind rests sweetly in the Lord--his faith causing his soul to have rest.

He has peace in God because he is justified by faith. His own soul has internal peace, because through faith he is sanctified. How could he have peace in either of these respects if he did not embrace Jesus Christ and his revealed plan of atonement by his blood and of cleansing by his Spirit?

In like manner by faith men live a joyous life, and a useful life. Faith lays the foundation for both the silent influence of a good example and for the active influence of direct efforts. You can look for neither without a living faith.

By faith men live a humble life. By faith they learn to take a low place. Indeed the very idea of faith involves humility; just as the idea of doing all yourself and trusting to no one for help, implies self-sufficiency and independence. The Christian is emptied of self-reliance ere he can be filled of Christ. He sees he has nothing to be proud of; that humility becomes him; and that his spirit must accept this low position ere he can receive all fulness of grace from his Lord.

By faith he lives a cheerful life. Generally the tenor of the life of faith is cheerful. Satisfied with God and his providence, why should he not be cheerful? He has occasion to rejoice evermore. God will bring out such glorious results, and his faith so distinctly anticipates them; he cannot but know that the church is safe, and that all he loves on earth is safe.

By faith he lives a self-denying life. If he has faith he will not make much of the little petty comforts of this life. His soul is upon far greater and better things. Why should he care for these little things when souls are to be saved or lost? He can afford to deny himself of almost every earthly comfort in order to save a soul,

or to please his Lord and Master. When he encounters labor and toil, glad to go to the very ends of the earth on the gospel mission, he knows he has nothing to fear and no reason to anticipate loss to himself. It is true he does not go for the sake of personal gain; but he goes, deeply conscious that he is pursuing the most truly valuable objects and pursuing them because they are most truly valuable. As for his own reward, he knows he finds it in large measures in his work itself, and as for the future, he cheerfully leaves it with God. Without faith, such a life would be hard indeed; but with faith, why should he fear poverty, or persecution or shame? All is right--all is well enough. Who cannot afford to submit to all this, so long as his soul reposes in faith on his God?

By faith he lives a spiritual life, and not a merely natural one. His life is spiritual, not in the abused and perverted sense in which modern necromancers use the word, but in the sense of being in real communion with the Father and with the Son and with the Holy Ghost. The Spirit of God dwells in his heart by faith.

By faith he lives a prayerful life. It is natural for him to pray. He loves prayer, and breathes it even as he breathes the atmosphere. He has confidence in God and expects blessings in answer to prayer. Such a man has reasons enough for much prayer.

His life of faith is hopeful. He is not easily discouraged, for his confidence rests in the mighty God. He expects to succeed in doing all that God would have him do; and why should he wish to do more? Is he a minister of the Gospel, going forth to preach? He goes hopeful. Why should he not? He expects success in the name of the Lord if he has faith.

He will by faith lead an active life. Faith will spur on his activities. Under an earnest faith in divine truth, how can he help being active and zealous? If he believes God's word, he will believe in the fearful peril of sinners, and in the awful doom that awaits them. How can he desist and abstain from labor for souls so long as he sees them stand on slippery places, with fiery billows rolling below? Will he not devote himself with untiring diligence to pluck whomsoever he can from the ruin of a lost sinner?

Faith secures sympathy with God. Confidence in any man ensures your sympathy with him. So if you have confidence in God, you will give him the warm and earnest sympathies of your heart. Unbelief locks up the heart against sympathy with God; but faith opens it wide. It is wonderful to see how true faith in God opens the gate ways of the soul and lets in the waters of spiritual life and power.

Faith makes the Christian's life humane. It trains him to look on all as God's children and to love them and care for them as such. Seeing how much pity and forbearance God has towards his sinning creatures, he is drawn by his faith to exercise the same.

By faith he lives a life of Gospel liberty. He is not in bondage to law or to fear. He does not pray because he is obliged to, but because he trusts and loves. All right mental exercises are spontaneous, God by his Spirit writing his own law on the heart. It would be easy to show that a life of faith secures all these results.

These results constitute real life. Hence we see how eminently and how universally it must be true that the just shall live by faith.

REMARKS.

1. Natural faith--such as unconverted men have in men and things--is useful to society--to the ends of business--to the comfort, not to say, the subsistence, of families. It is always useful so far as it goes, yet it

is not virtue, for it does not have respect to God, to his character, or his law. It may be good and useful, yet not be virtue, for it co-exists with selfishness and with enmity to God. Pirates may, nay must have it; yet are pirates, therefore, good citizens!

It is not saving faith, for it does not save men from sin, does not fit men for heaven.

2. Both in its ground and exercise, faith is perfect in heaven. Faith being perfect there, the state of society and the happiness of sentient beings there must be perfect. If faith were not perfect, society even in heaven could not be. All is right there because faith is perfect and universal.

3. All men who come to the knowledge of the gospel ought to live a life of faith. Strange that men do not see its value and its excellence. In my early life I took this view of faith and of the Christian life. In studying the great truths which they claim to believe, I said, I can account for the way Christians live by the nature of what they believe. Believing that Christ died for them, how can they do otherwise than love him and live to please and serve him? Believing thus, they must, rationally, act thus. This belief must be of the utmost value to them, so long as they live in this world, whether the things they believe are true or false. This reasoning of mine did not assume the truth of the Bible, but merely brought out the relations of the Christian life to those statements, whether true or false.

But after a little more reflection on the matter, it occurred to me that the very fact of the universal utility of this faith proves its divine origin and the divine truth of the things believed. Christian faith does in fact fit men for heaven; this proves its doctrine to be divine. It cannot be a lie; for no lie could have such results. It is impossible that a system can be false, which, believed, makes men so pure and holy. The fruits of Christian faith prove the Bible true, therefore, unless we accept the absurdity that to believe a lie will lift men above the world, will renovate their hearts and restore them to God's own image;--and who can believe this?

4. That man is far from being a philosopher as from being a Christian who does not know that true Christian faith is the essential condition of perfect society either in this world or the world to come. It must be the necessary condition of the mind's being in a perfect state. It must be ever present in that society which constitutes heaven.

5. The life of faith in Christ is too peculiar to be mistaken. It is said of Christians that they are a "peculiar people." They have a peculiar faith. They believe things which elevate the soul, purify the heart, raise the mind above the influence of sordid things and place it aloof from the debasing influences of sensuality, and all things low and mean. Faith in Christ must produce a life which will be its own witness. Look over society any where, and your eye must recognize the man who lives by faith. Such faith as the true Christian has must create a life so peculiar as to be readily distinguished from every other life.

6. Saving faith is in its very nature saving. Many think of this saving as only future--as only rescuing the soul at death from final perdition. This is a great and a grievous mistake. This Christian faith is that by which men live, not that by which they die. They are saved here first, and saved hereafter, because they are first saved here. If faith ever saves the soul, it must be first here. It saves them into happiness in heaven because it has first saved them into holiness on earth.

7. All men, not grossly ignorant, can see the nature and value of gospel faith. A man must be exceedingly stupid who can live in a world where faith is exhibited before his eyes, talked of all around him; and yet not be interested in the inquiry--What is this? How are these results produced? If he looks into this matter, he

cannot but see that the truths taught in the gospel need only be believed, and the results will be of the very greatest value to the soul. Let me ask that sinner whose aims hitherto have never risen above the mere enjoyments of time;--suppose you were not to believe the gospel for yourself, understanding it in a good degree as it is; you give it full credence, embracing it with all its precious provisions and promises;--do you think it would be strange if you should then say,--"I have enjoyed more in one hour than in all my life before"?

Ye who are in your sins can know but little yet of the great things of the gospel. You have never yet believed things which could give you more than a feverish pleasure, transient and deceptive. You have never yet believed any thing high, inspiring, ennobling. Now take your stand-point of vision above the great ocean of truth. Ascend the "Delectable Mountains," from whence you can take in a broad and clear view of the "Celestial City." Lo, there is a palace, built of God, for his saints from earth.

Did you ever see a royal palace? Have you ever scanned the lofty walls, the glittering towers, the artificial lakes, the gardens, lawns and trees and flowers? Then if so, you said--how noble to be owner of this! To be able to survey it all and say--This is mine! But when you become a true Christian and open your heart to a Christian's faith, you can say--All this will not begin to compare with my Master's palace to which He will take me home after a few days. This, compared with that, is only as the merest dunghill!

"In my Fathers' house are many mansions." Jesus said he was going to get them ready for us, and then would take us all home.--They we shall indeed be "at home in the presence of Jesus." He can tell us ten thousand things that took place ages before we were born. If you believed that you were to be there, would it be strange if you were too happy to sleep tonight? How many times have I heard it said within a few months by one and another--I have been too happy in God to sleep!

One of the most active business men of the city who had been skeptical was brought to see his sins and to be greatly concerned for himself. After attending meetings many evenings, he finally said to his wife--It does me no good to go to these meetings; I must stop. I am going out of town to-day. He went accordingly to meet the cars, but lo, they had gone! Upon his return his wife said--Now please go with me to the meeting once more. He consented; the truth took hold of his soul with power.

She had been praying for him for many years; and now he is converted. What is the result? She is too happy to sleep and so is he! They have a thousand things to talk over, to recount the mercies of the Lord and to celebrate his love. There was no sleep in that house for at least one night. And here was another most beautiful result; their two children are also converted, and they "rejoice, believing in God, with all their house."

The reason why people live as they do is that they lack faith. They fail to trust in God. They do not realize the great things of God's promises and of his love.

Finally, none can be happy even in heaven, without faith. Unless they can confide in God, it were vain to suppose they can be quiet and blessed even there. For, in that world, perhaps even more than in this, there will be things brought before their minds which they cannot understand. Under the government of an infinite God there must always be things done or permitted by the Great Ruler of all which minds so small and short-sighted as ours can by no means fathom. There is no alternative then but either to trust, or to rebel. Faith or sin--this is the only alternative. How wise, therefore, that God should train his children to faith before he ventures to take them up to heaven! And let them all take care that they do not even ask to go there, until they have faith enough to trust God as revealed here! It must be a fearful thing to go to

heaven unprepared to endure its discipline. God will take none there, till He sees they can bear it.

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