

Faith – Key to God's Treasury
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The nature of faith

Our soul possesses the amazing ability to sense God. Although this awareness of the Divine presence is weak and hazy in a person just beginning to grow spiritually, it gets stronger and becomes more and more conscious with a virtuous way of life. This, in turn, strengthens one's faith in Him, so that the inner feeling of God grows to a strong religious conviction. In such a state, the omnipresence of God, His infinite love and fatherly care are continuously felt and become a source of inner peace and strength.

True faith cannot be satisfied with a cold recognition of God's existence but strives to be in **close communion** with Him. The believing soul naturally reaches to God, as a sunflower turns toward the sun. In turn, an active relationship with God further strengthens the person's faith, so that his faith becomes a spiritual guide, based on personal experience. In some particularly gifted people faith grows into an all-illuminating and constantly inspiring idea, that leads them from this world of vanity into the transcendent world of eternal life. Among such people were the Virgin Mary, Saint John the Baptist, the Apostles John and Paul, and countless saints like Sergius of Radoneszh, Seraphim of Sarov, John of Kronstadt, Herman of Alaska and Blessed Xenia of Petersburg, to name just a few.

The significance of faith in a person's development lies in that it gives proper **direction** to all his aptitudes and powers. Specifically, it gives clarity and the correct outlook to his intellect, direction and purpose to his will, it ennobles and refines his senses. Faith brings **harmony** to a person's inner world. It frees one from base earthly interests and leads him into a realm of higher and holier experiences.

Faith and knowledge

In our time of many scientific achievements it has become customary to belittle faith in comparison to intellect. Knowledge is regarded as something firmly founded, positive, and completely objective. Faith, on the other hand, is considered to be arbitrary, subjective and unproved. However, both high confidence in scientific knowledge and disdain of faith are pitiable misconceptions.

First of all, to regard present knowledge as absolutely certain, proven and representing the absolute truth is very naive and historically unfounded. Perhaps it is an «ideal» of knowledge but not its state. It would be worthwhile to compare the theories about matter throughout human history – during ancient times, then towards the end of the last century, the middle of this one, and finally the latest discoveries of quantum mechanics – in order to be convinced that scientific ideas radically change with each new generation. Similar «revolutions» can be observed in all fields of science – in physics, astronomy, biology, medicine, etc. That which was considered to be unquestionably true yesterday is rejected today. As new scientists become popular for their discoveries, the old ones gradually fade into oblivion. We may well ponder that if humanity survives yet for a few more centuries, our descendants will discuss ironically the primitive ideas and theories of the «dark» twentieth century.

This fact should convince us that of most value is not knowledge in itself but the **ability** to delve deeper and deeper into the secrets of nature. And here, the propellant of science is not rationalistic knowledge based on the five human senses but **intuitive** vision. Many philosophers and scientists have experienced a sudden enlightenment which gave birth to their discoveries and new theories. Intuition, like faith, is a very valuable ability. It resembles faith but is a step below it, since intuition relates to the physical domain, whereas faith to the **spiritual**.

No one will dispute that the engineer's knowledge is valuable for practical matters such as designing and constructing something. But if no scientists existed, who by their **intuition** unlocked the secrets of nature, then engineers would have nothing to study, and human knowledge would be very limited. Thus it is not knowledge but intuition that leads to the progress of science. Let us consider another example. Many musicians are appreciated for their fine performance of musical compositions. But if there were no composers who were gifted with creative genius, the musicians would have nothing to play. The

genius of composers, poets, sculptors, artists and others like them, has the ability to transform their ideas into something beautiful, sublime and ennobling. Thus, wherever we look, we see that imagination, intuitive vision, inspiration and creative genius are all spiritual forces which lead to the progress of science and art.

Comparing faith to other elevated human abilities, we see that it, like intuition, **broadens** human reason. It gives men access to that which is **unattainable** by corporal senses. Thus, thanks to faith, we come to the conviction that the world which surrounds us is not eternal but came to existence by the will of One Allwise Creator. He created us and gave us an immortal soul so that we may share with Him eternal and blessed life. As a matter of fact, faith was often **ahead** of scientific discoveries by stating, for example, that our world is not eternal but appeared some time ago from «nothing» (the «Big bang» theory), that its origin is not matter but energy, that it gradually evolved from lower to higher states (theory of evolution), that there is a unity in the laws of nature (modern searches for a unifying force), that there should exist other worlds different from ours (the search for extraterrestrial intelligence), and so on.

Thanks to personal contact with God, believers receive a special **sense of truth**, a faculty to perceive what reason is yet incapable of comprehending. For example, the forthcoming resurrection of the dead, the Last Judgment, and the beginning of eternal life are all beyond our everyday experience and any possibility of verification, and yet we perceive these future events as certain truths and «know» that they will happen. Thus faith, as a spiritual eye, gives us the ability to perceive what lies far away on the horizon of the future.

However, even the most sensitive eye cannot see without light. Similarly, faith needs the spiritual light of **divine revelation**. God, in His love for us, revealed through the prophets, the apostles, and especially through His Only Begotten Son, all that is necessary for us to know for the spiritual development and salvation of our souls. Thus, God has revealed to us the mystery of the Trinity and of the Divine attributes, the mystery of the Incarnation and the power of the redeeming sufferings of the Son of God, the significance of His resurrection for our spiritual rebirth and corporal Resurrection on the last day of this world and so forth.

But by saying that the ability to believe is above physical knowledge, we do not wish to exclude reason or logical thinking. On the contrary, according to the plan of the Creator, all spiritual capabilities must be in **harmony** and reinforce one another. Genuine faith must not be blind nor light. Gullibility discloses laziness of the soul, naiveté of the mind. Reason must **help** faith to

differentiate between truth and delusion. Calm exploration of religious truth makes faith more **definite** and **founded**. The Lord Jesus Christ never demanded blind faith from His followers. On the contrary, He advised the Jews, «*Search the Scriptures; because they testify of Me*» (John 5:39). He also suggested that unbelievers examine His miracles in order to be convinced of His Divine ministry: «*Though you not believe Me, believe the works [that I do], that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me, and I in Him*» (John 10:38). Likewise, the apostles urged the early Christians to use reason and discretion in questions concerning faith: «*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world*» (1 John 4:1). In particular the apostles urged their disciples to hold to sound doctrine, rejecting fables and human fabrications (2Tim. 1:13, 4:3).

Thus, it is erroneous to set reason against faith; they complement and reinforce each other. Reason is for searching out, proving and substantiating. It protects faith from delusion and humanity from fanaticism. Faith, on the other hand, is the driving force that opens new horizons, elevates us to new heights. It can be compared to an engine, while reason to a steering wheel. Without the engine the car will not move, and without the steering wheel it may crash.

Dependence of faith on free will

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me» (Rev. 3:20). With these words our Savior tells us that He offers to each of us the gift of faith, but it is up to us to accept or to reject this gift.

The Lord is **merciful** to those who doubt not from obstinacy but due to spiritual **weakness** and inexperience. Those who **seek** the truth and lament their lack of faith receive Divine help to acquire faith. Thus, for example, Christ took pity on the despairing father of the possessed youth who cried out: *«Lord, I believe, help Thou my unbelief!»* (Mark 9:24) and healed his sick son. He likewise had compassion on the apostle Peter who, having become frightened of the storm, began to sink. Giving His hand to Peter, the Lord gently rebuked him, saying: *«O you of little faith, why did you doubt?»* (Matt. 14:30). Nor did the Lord reject the doubting Thomas, who wished to be personally convinced of the miracle of the Resurrection. The Lord, having condescended to Thomas with His appearance, did not, however, praise him for becoming a believer on the basis of an obvious proof but said to him, *«You believe because you have seen; blessed are those who do not see and believe»* (John 20:29). In other words, faith based on external experience has little value; it's actually not faith but ordinary knowledge. True faith is born of inner experience; it demands **sensitivity**, a spiritual up-lifting, and, therefore, is worthy of praise.

However, we see the complete opposite of such a searching faith in the Jewish scribes and Pharisees of Christ's time. They **obstinately** and stubbornly refused to believe in Jesus Christ as the God-sent Messiah. Neither the fulfillment in Christ of the ancient prophecies, nor His countless miracles and raising of the dead, nor signs in nature, nor even His Resurrection shook their unbelief. On the contrary, with each new miracle they became still more embittered and hostile towards Him. Thus if even Christ was unable to awaken faith in those who did **not want** to believe, is it any wonder that in our time there are conscious and adamant atheists? They claim that they do not believe because they see no miracles. But the real reason for their unbelief lies not in a lack of miracles, which occur daily in different parts of the world, but in the **negative** direction of their will. They simply **don't want** God to exist.

The problem of unbelief is closely tied to the sinfulness of human nature. Because the subject of faith is not an abstract theory but a positive teaching that demands certain behavior and imposes definite responsibilities, not everyone is willing to change his life around to adapt to its high moral standards. Faith puts

a check on a person's greed. It calls him to overcome his selfishness, to live moderately, to do good to others, even to sacrifice himself. When a man prefers his passions over the will of God and places his own good over the good of others, then he will do everything he can to repudiate arguments in favor of faith. The Savior indicated that an **evil will** is the chief cause of unbelief when He said: *«For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God»* (John 3:20–21).

Being capable of suppressing faith within himself, man is also capable of **strengthening** it. Turning again to the Gospel, we find in it striking examples of ardent faith. Inspiring in this regard are the examples of the Roman centurion, the Canaanite woman, the woman with an issue of blood, the blind men of Jericho, and similar others. The Lord repeatedly called for His listeners to imitate the faith of these people. Consequently, it lies within our power, with God's help, to **gather** and **direct** our spiritual capabilities towards a greater faith. Faith, as everything good, demands **effort**. That is the reason a reward is promised for it: *«He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned»* (Mark 16:16).

Faith as the foundation of hope

Trials and sorrow are inevitable in this temporary life. At difficult moments only faith can give a person the necessary spiritual strength. When a person with a weak faith despairs during misfortunes, feels defeated and complains bitterly, the believing person more strongly turns to God for help. He disperses the tide of despondency with hope in God, having learned from previous trials that *»whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame" (Rom. 9:33).*

Sorrows are the «rainy days» and «storms» in our life and are meant to **test** our faith. During fair weather every sailor can fantasize about his skills, but it is during a storm that the genuine mariner is unveiled. Reading the Holy Scripture or lives of the saints, one becomes convinced that righteous people displayed their faith more obviously during persecutions and sufferings than during calm and normal conditions. When the Apostle Paul refers to the Old Testament righteous, he specifically mentions their difficult moments as examples of strong faith. He thus concludes his overview of their lives: some of them *«were tortured, not receiving deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trials of mocking and scourging, of chains and imprisonment. Some were stoned, some were sawn in two, others were tempted and slain with the sword. Some wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented. Of whom the world was not worthy, wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth ... Therefore, – concludes the apostle – since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every burden of sin (which so easily ensnares us) and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. Instead of the joy that was set before Him He endured the cross, despising the shame. Now He sits at the right hand of the throne of God» (Hebr. chapters 11–12).*

Although faith helps man to face suffering with fortitude, the question remains: why does the Lord permit the righteous to suffer? The answer is not obvious at all; *«Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord, or as His counselor has taught Him?» (Isai. 40:13).* Nevertheless, the Apostle Paul explains that *«all things work for good to them who love God» (Rom. 8:28).* The word «all» includes sorrows as well. Actually, having himself experienced innumerable trials during his missionary journeys, Saint Paul shares with his disciples what he has learned: *«Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distress for Christ's sake; for when I am weak,*

then I am strong; for the strength of God is made perfect in weakness" (2Cor. 12:10).

Sorrows convince man of the instability of life's blessings, remind him of God the Rescuer, of eternal life, and teach him patience. They develop fortitude and constancy in good deeds. When man can expect help from nowhere, he turns to God with all his strength. And while he is troubled from the outside, in his heart he finds Divine peace and consolation. Such direct awareness of God is greatly beneficial to a man's faith. Thus, on the one hand, faith helps a man to bear sorrows, and on the other, sorrows strengthen the faith in him. For this reason Saint James taught Christians: *«My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience»* (James 1:2).

Probably because faith gives man fortitude at difficult times and serves as a **bulwark** for his spiritual life, our Savior named it a rock, saying: *«On this rock I will build My Church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it»* (Matt. 16:18). Indeed, it is impossible to enumerate all the persecutions of Christians in the two millennia of the existence of the Church. While so many empires and powerful governments fell and have completely disappeared from the face of the Earth, Christ's Church, founded on faith in Him, stands firm and will remain invincible until the end of the world.

Faith as the key to God's treasures

Faith draws a person into a living communication with God in heartfelt, concentrated prayer. When a person comes into close contact with the Almighty, then, according to the words of the Savior, everything becomes possible to him: «*Whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive ... If you have faith as (small as) a mustard seed, and you will say to this mountain, «Move from here to there,» it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you*» (Matt. 21:22, 17:20). Thus even the smallest faith can work wonders provided it is **wholesome and healthy** like a mustard seed. The great miracle worker Saint John of Kronstadt, speaking from his own experience, called faith «the key to God's treasures.»

True faith has nothing to do with self-confidence. Greatly mistaken are those who confuse faith with ordinary auto-suggestion. Some sectarian preachers teach that one must convince oneself of whatever one desires, for example: in health, success, or well-being – and that is enough to obtain it. These auto-suggestions resemble a game in which a child imagines that he is sailing across the sea or riding a horse while he sits on the floor in his room. Faith built on self-suggestion leads to self-delusion and a spiritual catastrophe.

True faith acts not by the power of imagination or self-hypnosis but in that it **joins** a person to the ultimate **Source** of all life and strength – to Almighty God. Faith is like a vessel with which one scoops up from the Divine fountain, and prayer acts as an **arm** with which one reaches into it. It is important to take recourse **prudently** to the power of faith. Because only God knows what is best for us, in praying one should be less concerned about pressing one's own desires and more about understanding what is the **will of God**. After all, prayer should not become a monologue but a two-way **conversation**. And in every conversation one must learn to listen as well. When we sincerely pray to God, He replies to us in our heart and in subsequent external circumstances.

Turning to the Gospel accounts, we see that those people who possessed an exceptionally strong faith as, for example, the Roman centurion, the Canaanite woman, the friends of the paralytic, and others, were all very far from any elation or pathos. Actually, they all were extremely **humble** people (Matt. 8:10, 15:22, 9:2). The combination of strong faith and humility is not accidental. A deeply believing person feels, more than anyone else, the greatness and the almightiness of God. And the more he realizes it, the more keenly he becomes aware of his own limitations and deficiency. The great miracle workers such as, for example, the prophets Moses and Elisha, the apostles Peter and Paul and

those like them were always distinguished by profound humility.

Faith acting through love

Is there an interrelationship between faith and good works? Some ask: is faith alone sufficient for salvation, or are good works also necessary? The fact that many contemporary Christians oppose faith to good works reveals how impoverished and distorted their concept of Christianity has become. True faith extends not only over man's mind but over **all** the powers of his soul, including the heart and will. Many contemporary preachers have narrowed the concept of faith to a rational acceptance of the Gospel's teaching. They declare: «Only believe, and you will be saved.» The error here, just as with the pharisaic approach, consists in the **formal** and legalistic understanding of salvation. The Jews in Christ's time taught justification by fulfillment of the Mosaic Law, while Protestants since Luther's times teach justification by faith alone, independent of good works. Traditional Christianity, however, calls for **complete spiritual re-birth**: *"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation«* (2Cor. 5:17). Salvation is not only the resettlement from earth to paradise but the **grace-filled state** of man's renewed soul. According to our Lord: *»The Kingdom of God is within you«* (Luke 17:21). In this renewed state a complete harmony is established between internal convictions and external behavior. Here good works become fruits which naturally grow on a healthy tree. And on the contrary, lack of good works testify of an ill and dying soul.

Now, spiritual re-birth is not achieved instantaneously. Christ's words to those who believed, *»Thy faith has saved thee,«* (Matt. 9:22) refer to that crucial **turning point** made by those who have decided to break with the past and follow Jesus Christ. Without this radical change in thinking, any improvement and spiritual progress are impossible. Naturally, after a person has chosen the right path he must subsequently **walk** on it, i.e., apply its high principles with patience and perseverance. All New Testament books speak about working on oneself and becoming more like Christ: *«We were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life»* (Rom. 6:4). What is needed here is not abstract faith but that which acts through love (Gal. 5:6).

The Apostle James firmly rises up against those who separate faith from good works, saying: *«What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,' but you do not give them the things which are*

needed for the body, what does it profit? ... But someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have works.' Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe; and tremble!» Further, the apostle gives examples of righteous men and women of old who proved their faith by their works, and he draws the following conclusion: *«Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? ... For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also»* (James 2:14–26).

The Apostle Paul likewise does not recognize faith without its fruit: *«Though I have the gift of prophesy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could move mountains, and have not love, I am nothing»* (1Cor. 13:2–3). Therefore, correct understanding of faith dispels all doubt as to which is more important – faith or works. They are inseparable, like the light and warmth of a flame.

How to strengthen one's faith

Thus, among the many talents and faculties of the human spirit, faith is the most precious of the Divine gifts. Faith broadens man's horizons and gives him a proper outlook, reveals to him the purpose of his life, encourages him during hard times and gladdens his heart, empowers his prayer and gives him access to a multitude of God's treasures and mercies.

Sadly, however, our life of plenty and well-being weakens our faith, and God's goodness gets forgotten. As faith grows dim, a man's inner condition becomes increasingly disordered: he loses clarity of thought and purpose of life, his spiritual strength leaves him, emptiness and despondency firmly set into his heart, he becomes irritable and dissatisfied with everything. After all, the soul cannot live without faith, just as a plant cannot live without light and moisture. No matter how intelligent and talented he might be, with faith extinguished a person descends to the level of a cunning animal, or even a predator.

In order to escape such a «*shipwreck of faith*» (1Tim. 1:19), one must seriously concern oneself with the **renewal** of his soul. But how? We know that all talents require exercise: to preserve a sharp mind, it must be engaged in mental work; so that fingers maintain their flexibility, it is necessary to practice on a musical instrument; to have the body remain limber, it is necessary to do gymnastic exercises; and so on. If people expend so much energy and money to develop and preserve their physical abilities, should not we Christians strive to strengthen our spiritual capabilities?

Specifically: to strengthen our faith, we must **live spiritually**. This includes regular reading of the Holy Scripture, meditation about God and the purpose of our life, fasting and prayer. When praying, one must make an effort to concentrate on the meaning of the words and **feel** the presence of God. It is also important to repent sincerely for one's sins, go to Confession and take Communion on a regular basis. Finally, one must try to live not for oneself alone but for the good of one's neighbor and one's church. The heart of one who loves is warmed by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Of course, in trying to lead a Christian life one cannot avoid battles, trials and difficulties. At times it may seem that the whole world is armed against us. These are unwanted but precious periods in which we are given the opportunity to grow spiritually and become better Christians.

In striving to strengthen our faith, let us always remember that ultimately faith is a **gift** of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul testified to this: «*The fruit of*

*the Spirit is: joy, love, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, kindness, faith» (Gal. 5:22). Let us, therefore, ask God for **faith**, that great spiritual treasure. As Jesus Christ has promised: «Ask, and it shall be given unto you; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you» (Matt. 7:7). And as faith grows, it will bring with it peace of mind, joy, and a foretaste of final triumph over all evil. «**This is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith**» (1 John 5:4).*

Poems on Faith

Oh, wondrous holy Faith,
You are a miracle streaming current,
You are the door of the soul to the abode of Paradise,
You are the dawn of the future life!
Burn in me, lamp of Faith,
Burn more clearly, do not go out,
Be everywhere a faithful companion to me
And enlighten the path of life for me!

K. R. (1852–1915)

Oh, my God! I give thanks
For Thine having given my eyes
To see the world – Thine eternal temple –
And the earth, the sky and the dawn. . .
Let torments threaten me, –
I give thanks for this moment,
For everything which I understood with my heart,
Of which the stars speak to me. . .
Everywhere I sense, everywhere
Thee, Lord: in the night silence,
And in the most remote star,
And in the depth of my soul.

I wish my life to be
Unceasing praise to Thee;
Thee for midnight and the dawn!
For life and death – I thank!
D. S. Merezhkovsky (1866–1941)

Faith

Blessed is he who with holy faith
Raises, inspires his spirit,
And strengthens his heart as with steel armor

From the storms of life.
For him trials are not terrible,
Nor is remoteness, nor the depth of the sea;
Grief and sufferings are not terrible,
Nor is the power of death terrible.

A. Ushakov

Poems translated from the Russian by Dimitry J. Hicks Hloboschin
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Содержание

Faith – Key to God's Treasury епископ Александр (Милеант)	1
The nature of faith	2
Faith and knowledge	3
Dependence of faith on free will	6
Faith as the foundation of hope	8
Faith as the key to God's treasures	10
Faith acting through love	12
How to strengthen one's faith	14