

Faith: A Personal Journey to Understanding

by Thom Ernst

My six siblings and I had the privilege of being raised by godly parents in a Christian home. From a very early age, we memorized Scripture – whole chapters or individual verses. Our parents believed the words of the Psalmist: “Thy word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against thee” ~ Psalm 119:11. Now, as I draw closer to the finish line of this life, Paul’s words come to mind “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith” 2 Timothy 4:7.

It would be nice to be able to define with understanding, exactly what it is that Paul kept; don’t you think? How many who claim “faith” as an integral part of their lives can actually define it? Yet it is to be the bedrock as well as the guiding light of our lives. “The just shall live by faith” ~Habakkuk 2:4 – and repeated at least three times in the New Testament. Can you define it? In order to define it we have to understand it. Too many use a synonym to put substance to faith: belief or trust. If we are honest with ourselves, while those words have meaning and indeed are facets of faith, they don’t convey the understanding we need for a definition. Then again there are those who are satisfied with a cursory definition and ask, “What’s the big deal?” “Why is being able to define something so important?”

It has been said (when and by whom other than here and by me, I have no clue) that if you can’t define something then you don’t really understand it. In other words, definition and understanding are integral to each other. I believe that. I’m a math teacher and there are basically two ways to teach math: by rote i.e. learn the formula etc. or by understanding. The US is failing miserably in its educational attempts to bring students to understanding. The reason, in my humble opinion, is because you cannot fully engage the mind in the latter without a rudimentary knowledge of the former, meaning memorized math facts. It would be like trying to get a child to increase their reading comprehension skills without ever having learned to read – yeah, that’s the elephant in the Language Arts room. We’re failing at understanding because we haven’t learned the basics. That holds true pretty much across the board. You don’t want a doctor who has simply memorized the symptoms coupled with disease names and the correct pharmaceutical aid that will help solve the problem. No, you want a doctor who understands how the body works and why certain drugs have good effects and others don’t. The same is true with “faith”. If we don’t understand it; if we can’t define it; then, how can we use it to live? Consider these verses:

“To each is given a measure of faith...” ~Romans 12:3.

“Faith without works is dead...” ~James 2:26.

“Without faith it is impossible to please God...” ~Hebrews 11:6.

“Walk by faith and not by sight...” ~2 Corinthians 5:7.

“Faith comes by hearing...” ~Romans 10:17.

“If you have faith the size of a mustard seed ...” ~Matthew 17:20.

“When the son of man comes, will he find faith on the earth...” ~Luke 18:8.

Note that last one. What a sobering thought!

I can remember asking the question of my dad during our home bible study: “What is faith?” He answered with a quote from Scripture. Unsatisfied, I asked the same question of my Sunday School teacher: “What is faith?” He too answered with the same Scripture. As a young teen, I was part of a larger group of young people called Youth for Christ. It was a national organization seeking to evangelize and bring young people into a relationship with God. At one of our bible studies, I again

raised my question to the leader: “What is faith?” and again the response was the same Scripture. Interestingly enough all the quotes as answers to my question were from the Faith Chapter, Hebrews 11 – a chapter my siblings and I had memorized years before. “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” ~Hebrews 11:1. I came away from each of those encounters with two thoughts: First, I was impressed with the spiritual depth of those answering and second, disappointed with my own lack of depth because I still didn’t get it; and it wouldn’t be until years later that I came to understand that they didn’t get it either!

Fast-forward to those years later. I’m now in my 40’s, a Pastor leading a small bible study and someone raises the question: “Pastor, what is faith?” Wouldn’t you know it! I stepped into the same void of lack of understanding as my mentors had and I answered with Scripture: “Faith is the substance of things hoped for the evidence of things unseen”. At that point I knew that just as I didn’t know the definition of faith, my mentors didn’t either. So, I locked myself in my study and tried to bring understanding to my lack of the same. I had lots of books, and I perused them diligently and I gleaned a lot of opinions but no concrete definition that would satisfy and solve this spiritual equation.

Over the years, one of the things I have learned both by books and by experience is that the meaning of stated thoughts is in the mind of the author. In other words, your perception of what I said may or may not match what I meant. Now get this because our Society is giving lie to this great truth: our perception is not necessarily the meaning! Our perception may be wrong! We have filters, rose tinted glasses if you will; and things we hear someone say pass through those filters in the course of being processed into what we understand as what the speaker meant. We can be spot on or miss it completely or anything in-between.

Today, perception is King – meaning be damned! Listen to the Pundits espouse on what someone meant: Spin, obfuscation, fake news and bold-faced lies all pass as the true meaning of what the speaker meant and the reality is, in all probability none of it is! When was the last time you heard someone ask for clarification about something that was said? Most times the speaker is never given the chance to explain as the spinners rush to be the loudest voice in denouncing the speaker. It’s everywhere: Politics, Media, Courts, Business board meetings and now to the detriment of all, Social Media! Don’t get me started on the morass of “I misspoke” – what the heck does that mean? Truth lies trampled in the streets (Isaiah 59:14), because meaning and even intent be damned! “My truth” is in vogue today. There’s no such thing as “my truth”. Truth is absolute! “My truth” is simply my perception of truth; and that can either be right as rain or wrong as lies!

“When the son of man comes, will he find faith on the earth...?” Will he find faith on the earth? Pastor, what is faith? I was ashamed because I had given the stock Christian response bolstered by the use of Scripture. I was determined to find out; yet my search in others’ understanding or lack of it proved futile. Finally, I remembered: Meaning is in the mind of the author. So simple. So profound yet I had never asked the Author, What is faith? “Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith...” ~Hebrews 12:2. There is no doubt, at least among Christians, that Jesus lived a life of faith. “Search the Scriptures” he said, “These are they which testify of me...” ~John 5:39. He said, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free...” ~John 8:32. So, I searched the Scriptures and I asked the Author “What is faith?” And He showed me. He answered me and helped me create a definition. Welcome to my journey!

According to the verse most quoted in giving definition to faith, Hebrews 11:1, faith is a gateway to understanding our world. Whether the world viewed through a telescope or the one viewed through a microscope or the one seen with the naked eye “Through faith we understand that the worlds were

framed by the word of God”. In other words, without faith as a component there will be no understanding of our universe.

Stephen Hawking, noted intellectual physicist, set out to understand the origins of our universe; and, in his latest book, published after his death, he concluded: “There is no God”. In spite of his astounding intellect, he missed it completely. The shepherd king, David, said, “The heavens declare the glory of God the firmament shows his handiwork. Day unto day utters speech and night unto night shows knowledge. There is no speech nor language where his voice is not heard” ~Psalm 19:1-3. David marveled at it, Stephen missed it. Both had a measure of faith. Both saw the same things, although Stephen saw with greater depth and clarity of physical sight i.e. the Hubble telescope.

Faith, understanding it, defining it or exercising it is not a matter of degree of intellect. The critical question becomes: “Is faith an integral part of our understanding?” – spiritual and physical!

Why is faith so important? I know a few people who couldn't care less about understanding the universe. So, what's the big deal? Well, according to that writer of Hebrews 11; “Without faith it is impossible to please God” ~Hebrews 11:6. And if God's not pleased and we're trying to please Him with our good works and do so without faith, it's a bit like arranging deck chairs on the Titanic. It's futile. Our end is certain doom because if God's not pleased, we're toast – um...literally!

You've been very patient in wading through all this to get to this point and I won't keep you in suspense any longer. When I searched the scriptures for meaning of faith I looked specifically at Jesus. I then compared what I found out about His life with those other “heroes of the faith” mentioned in Hebrews 11. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham and others. Lo and behold, their experiences matched what I found out about Jesus. Their “walk of faith” had the same components. Understanding personal faith reveals why Abel is a faith-hero and Cain is not. Why Jacob is in that list and Esau is not.

Here is what I found:

Jesus said, “I only do what God shows me to do” ~John 5:19. And “I only say what God tells me to say” ~John 8:28. In other words, Jesus said and did what God told Him to say and do. He told His disciples, “Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” ~Matthew 4:4. We are also instructed by the Apostle Paul that “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God” ~Romans 10:17. Faith then, is a result of hearing the word of God. In New Testament era Greek, there are two words translated as “word” in English: Those Greek words are Logos and Rhema. Logos is universal, meaning everything said; and Rhema is specific to time and place. Both are used in relation to God's speaking, and both are used in relation to faith. In our simplified understanding, Logos would be the Bible, and the works of creation and Rhema would be specific words that God reveals to us. Now, those specific words, Rhema, can come from anywhere or anyone; but there is a knowing in our spirit that the Author is God. I have at times been rebuked by a kind word from someone but the knowledge in my spirit was that it was a rebuke or encouragement, as the case may be, from God. Yes, He still speaks and when He does it's Rhema, specific to our cause, need or situation. Jesus lived by both the Logos and the Rhema the general and the specific. He did so every day of His life; He lived, he walked by faith. When you look at the Old Testament heroes of faith, the Old Testament prophets or the New Testament disciples and apostles you see they did the same. Paul knew the Logos from God, but he wasn't applying it until he received a Rhema on his way to Damascus and was converted. How can we define that? In the former he heard (in a general sense of understanding) in the latter he heeded the specific word. That

was his faith in action. Had he ignored and not heeded he would not have been converted. That's why James can say with power that faith without a result (i.e. works) is dead. A lot of people know what the Bible says but they don't heed it – a difference between darkness and light. James went on to say that even the devils believe and they tremble ~James 2:19. So faith is more than the synonym "believe" "He that has ears to hear let him hear [heed]..." ~Matthew 11:5.

When we take all that Jesus is and did and then take the Scriptures that teach us that faith is rooted in God's Logos and Rhema, we can define it. Now, doing so may limit the ability of faith to grow beyond a static definition that is why care must be exercised and we must realize that a definition is often only the starting point of deeper understanding. Like the mustard seed that becomes a gigantic plant. Our definition is just the seed. Here it is:

Faith is HEARING a WORD (Logos and Rhema) FROM God; and, HEEDING the WILL of God. Not with the HEAD but from the HEART!

That truth has given me a freedom to understand that I had never experienced. Check it out and then ask God to make the definition unique to you.