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activated

Vol 13 • Issue 5

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Push the boundaries



PERSONALLY SPEAKING

It seems that a lot of people, Christians and non-Christians alike, think Christianity is all about dos and don'ts. Keep the rules and we earn God's blessing; break the rules and we fall out of favor. Is it really as clear cut as that?

In Paul's letter to the believers in Rome, he jumped into a controversy that was consuming much of the early Christians' time and energy and threatened to divide them: Did God expect Christians to keep the Mosaic Law?¹ That controversy was actually an extension of the discussions and debates that had been going on among Jews for hundreds of years over which of the Law's 613 commandments were the most important to obey and what to do when conflicts arose.

If those on one side of the Christian debate were right, then those on the other side must be wrong—right?

Wrong, according to Paul. He was convinced that Christians are free from keeping the Mosaic Law, but he also believed that things aren't as black and white as we tend to try to make them. No one has a corner on "rightness," he said in so many words. And besides, God isn't hung up on details. He's bigger than that, His love more inclusive. The real issue, the one that matters most to God, is that we each act out of love for Him and others as dictated by our personal convictions, based on our understanding of His Word.

Personal convictions are just that—personal. They aren't uniform, genetic, or transferable. Neither do they just happen. They are the result of personal triumphs and tragedies, study, reflection, and soul searching, generally over months or years. They also aren't static; they change and mature with us. They become a little clearer each time we put thought into them, a little stronger each time we act on them or they are put to the test.

"Come," God says, "let us reason together."²

Keith Phillips
For *Activated*

1. See Romans chapter 14.

2. Isaiah 1:18

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BY LILY NEVE

I CHOOSE FAITH

A FRIEND OF MINE HAS EXTENSIVELY STUDIED A NUMBER OF RELIGIONS, and we regularly enjoy deep discussions about various belief systems—discussions that invariably come around to our own beliefs.

“I respect those who believe in God, but I can’t manage to myself,” my friend once said. “I don’t feel it. I also can’t understand all that spiritual and supernatural stuff.”

I could relate. Not the part about not believing in God, but the part about not feeling or understanding the supernatural, which is what many people equate with faith.

“I don’t feel it either,” I told him. “I believe because I choose to. For me, faith is a choice.”

I’ve thought about that conversation and my answer a lot since. I

grew up in an atmosphere of faith but went through the usual teenage stages of questioning. Many of my friends, both mentors and peers, had told me about the experiences that had helped build their faith. Many of those had been centered on supernatural events—signs, dreams, and mystic, unexplainable circumstances that they called miracles. I hadn’t had any of these experiences myself, and I sometimes thought of logical explanations for theirs.

What I did see, however, were little manifestations of God’s love and care in my daily life. Even though some of those situations could also have been explained as happy coincidences or acts of goodness on someone else’s part,

they were consistent with what I had read and been taught about the nature and essence of God. Through them I felt loved and cared for, that someone was looking out for me. I chose to believe that this was God working in my life, even though I didn’t experience the spiritual highs or see the fireworks that some do. What I have is a quiet fire, but it’s kept me warm for years now.

I live a rather unconventional life, but God has always looked out for me and I have an inner assurance that He will continue to do so. My life is in His hands. Feelings are irrelevant. I believe because I choose to.

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Don’t neglect your critical faculties. Remember that God is a rational God, who has made us in His own image. God invites and expects us to explore His double revelation, in nature and in Scripture, with the minds He has given us, and to go on in the development of a Christian mind to apply His marvelous revealed truth to every aspect of the modern and post-modern world.—*John Stott, Anglican cleric*

HEALTHY DOUBTS

BY MARIA FONTAINE

ACCEPTING POINTS OF DOCTRINE WITHOUT QUESTION DOES NOT COME NATURALLY TO EVERYBODY.

Just as God made people very different in their personalities and physical makeup, there are also different kinds of faith. Whether you need time to study and reflect and reason before reaching a place of belief, or you embrace spiritual concepts with little questioning, the goal is what counts—a living faith.

It's not unusual to go through crises of faith or to question doctrine, even foundational principles. God often works through such battles of the mind and spirit and uses them to strengthen us. He can use this process to help us get back to the foundation of our faith or to reaffirm our beliefs, to help us reach a clearer understanding of not only what we believe, but why we believe as we do.

Many Christians have experienced crises of faith. Three noteworthy

examples that come to mind are Martin Luther, Mother Teresa, and Adoniram Judson.¹ Their crises of faith and the battles they fought to reach a place of faith and understanding are well documented. Their questioning resulted in stronger faith and deeper understanding of God and the intimate relationship He seeks with each of us. Their battles and victories have inspired many. I would venture to say that their struggles also gave them a deeper understanding of the battles others face in affirming their faith.

Rather than looking at doubts only as potential threats to our faith,

to be resisted and pushed out of mind and heart, we need to bear in mind that questioning, doubt, and even skepticism can be stepping stones to a stronger, more mature faith. In some cases, God may lead us to work through an issue until we reach a place of peace and understanding, but at the same time we need to accept that we will possibly never find the answers to some questions in this life. “The secret things belong to the LORD our God.”² That can be the biggest test of all, when all we can do is trust God and hold on to the promise that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.³

MARIA FONTAINE AND HER HUSBAND, PETER AMSTERDAM, ARE DIRECTORS OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL (TFI), A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY OF FAITH. ■

1. 19th-century American missionary who served in Burma for almost forty years and translated the Bible into Burmese.

2. Deuteronomy 29:29

3. Hebrews 11:6

FAITH'S FOUNDATION

A Tale of Two Cities

BY KEITH PHILLIPS

IN ACTS CHAPTER 17 WE READ ABOUT APOSTLE PAUL'S FIRST EXPERIENCES IN THESSALONICA AND BEREА,

two cities in what is modern-day Greece. Both cities had Jewish populations, synagogues, and apparently a number of prominent Greeks who had converted to Judaism.

In Thessalonica, "as was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. 'This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,' he said."¹ Some of his listeners were

persuaded, but others were not. Those who weren't stirred up persecution, and Paul and Silas fled to the nearby city of Berea.

Again Paul taught about Jesus at the local synagogue. "Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."²

In both cities Paul found people who believed in the one true God but realized there was more to Him than they knew or understood. This was why they gathered at the synagogue, to study and discuss matters of faith. Both groups of believers heard the same message from Paul, and both had the same resource for examining that message—the Holy Scriptures. What set the Bereans apart is that

they "examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."

This was precisely what Paul was trying to accomplish with his "reasoning, explaining, and proving." As he told another group of early believers, "My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God."³ He didn't want them to simply take his word for it; he wanted them to base their faith on personal conviction gained through the Spirit of God leading them to the answers they sought as they explored the Scriptures. ■

1. v. 2, 3 NIV

2. v. 11 NIV

3. 1 Corinthians 2:4–5

Whom I Have Believed

BY JESSIE RICHARDS

“I KNOW WHOM I HAVE BELIEVED, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him.”¹ Last night, that verse came to mind and hovered for a long time. It’s not unusual for a Bible verse to show up in my thoughts, but this time was different. The words and their richness were enhanced—they seemed “louder” or something. I turned the phrases over and over, and looked at them from all angles, meditating on what that passage meant to me.


Paul didn’t say, “I know *what* I have believed” or “I know *why* I have believed,” but “I know *whom* I have believed.” Here was a man who hadn’t even met Jesus or heard Him teach during His brief public life, and yet Paul knew Him so well and loved Him so much that he spent the rest of his life giving Jesus to others and establishing foundations for the faith of many millions to follow—and suffering enormously in the process. He didn’t do all that to ensure that we would learn correct doctrine. He did it so we could know the glorious person whom he had had the privilege to come to know.

I realized last night more clearly than I had in a while that my faith is all about *whom* I believe and my relationship with Him, the knowing Him, the loving Him.

It’s easy sometimes, at least for me, to get a bit tangled up in the what and why of faith. It is important to know what one believes and why, of course, and I’m certainly not going to stop studying the Bible or doing related research that helps me understand my overall faith. The fact is, though, that while other things are significant, *He* is the heart of it all. Everything pales in importance to *whom* I believe in.



1. 2 Timothy 1:12 NIV



I'd like to know more about a lot of things. I'd like to know Jesus better too. And I plan to. It's clear enough, though, when I think about what or whom I know best, that it's Him. I'm in my mid-thirties, and I've spent some part of almost every day of my life with Him—talking with Him, listening to Him, and trying to understand Him and please Him. I still don't understand Him as well as I'd like to, and I know I haven't always pleased Him, but the important thing is that with all that we've been through together, all the time we've spent together, and all the attention we've given each other, I can say with confidence that I know Him.

And I know that I can trust Him.

Right now, one of the things that weigh most heavily on my mind is my future, both immediate and long-term. I'm facing more choices than I ever have before. I like to have options, but lots of options at once can get a bit overwhelming at times. Jesus has given me the power to make almost anything I want of my life, and I appreciate that. The truth is, though, that I trust Him more than I trust myself. I'm going to have my say in where my future goes, but in no way am I going to either plan my destination or try to get there without Him. I know I need Him to guard my future, so I entrust it to Him.

Then there are my family and close friends. I'm not an emotional, gushy person, so they may not realize this, but I care immensely and often worry about them. When I can't sleep, one of my "favorite" activities is analyzing others' situations—sometimes their pasts or presents, but particularly their futures. I wonder whether their plans are going to work out. Sometimes I reach less-than-positive conclusions. But then, when I get caught up in worrying and fearing for them—their careers, their finances, their health, their children, or all of the above—it's usually not long before I realize that my fretting is not going to help them. And then I realize that not much of anything I might try to do would help them much, given my current


situation and means. I don't despair, though, because Jesus "is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him." And that includes every person I care about.

Last night, once again, the faces of those I love flashed through my mind like a computer folder of JPGs. Yes, each one has needs, problems, challenges, and in some cases lots of baggage to deal with. But they also have the same God I have, the God who is able, the God who guards what we entrust to Him. I'm entrusting them to Him. We're all going to be okay.

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BY MARIA FONTAINE

LOVING GOD With Our Minds



JESUS SAID THAT WE ARE TO LOVE GOD “with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind.”¹ Notice that He didn’t just refer to our heart and soul, but also to our mind. God gave human beings mental faculties. He created us to be intellectual beings, capable of rational thought, intellectual growth, critical thinking, and reasoning. He also gave us a conscience to guide us in making choices that are morally right.

The apostle Paul said, “One person considers some days to be more sacred than others, while another person considers all days to be the same. Each person must

have their own convictions.”² Paul also said in that same discourse, “If you do anything you believe is not right, you are sinning.”³ The point he was making is that it’s important we each explore our beliefs to determine where our faith lies on various issues. Analyzing, discussing, and debating points of doctrine can be healthy for your faith, as those all require you to research, dig deep, and find the scriptural foundation for your beliefs.

Using our mental faculties and critical, rational thinking is not meant to undermine our faith, of course, but it can. Some people do reason themselves out of their faith. But for others, critical, rational thinking serves to strengthen their faith. It depends on how the person goes about the questioning process. Paul, Saint Augustine, Martin

Luther, C. S. Lewis, and many other great Christian thinkers used reasoning and logic to strengthen their and others’ faith and understanding of doctrine, as well as to help shape the faith and intellectual viewpoints of Christianity.

We can use our intellectual abilities to glorify God and to affirm our faith, just as we can use any of the other skills and talents He has given us. We can use our minds to better love God, as Jesus told us to do. We can also use our intellectual abilities to find the place He has for us in this world, to further our education and understanding of the world, and more. As is the case with all gifts from His hand, He expects us to use the mental abilities He has given us, to invest them wisely, and to allow them to benefit ourselves and others. ■

1. Matthew 22:37

2. Romans 14:5 CEB

3. Romans 14:23 NLT

Influences

BY PETER AMSTERDAM

WHEN THE TOPIC OF PERSONAL AND SOCIAL VALUES COMES UP THESE DAYS, it's often in the context of what kinds of movies, music, reading material, computer games, and Internet usage are good or acceptable, and which aren't. Often, this generates quite a bit of disagreement between generations and even between peers. That's not surprising, because all of these things are highly subjective. Something that has an obvious bad effect on one person may not seem to have a bad effect on someone else.

Some people have the attitude that a lot of violence, gore, or foul language in movies doesn't have a bad effect on them. They like that kind of movie and don't think it's harmful for them personally. But whether they realize it or not, or want to admit it or not, regular intake of things that promote or condone these types of attitudes and behavior does have an effect on their spirit and will eventually come out in their own attitudes and behavior. They would probably be better off if they asked themselves not only, "Is this harmful to me?" but also, "Is this good for me?"

Of course, the smartest thing any of us can do when we aren't sure whether something is more likely to influence us for better or for worse is to look to God's Word, the Bible, and to measure the thing in question against the standard we find there. The word used in most English versions of the Bible to describe the kind of good effect I'm talking about here is "edify," which means "to enlighten; to improve the morals or knowledge of somebody." The Bible makes it clear that we should pursue things that are edifying and avoid things that aren't.

It's impossible in this hi-tech, media-driven age to block out everything that could have a bad effect on you, but if you recognize a particular influence as a danger, you will try to minimize its effect by minimizing your exposure to it. It all comes down to personal conviction—how convinced you are that something is harmful to your spirit and how serious you are about avoiding it.

PETER AMSTERDAM AND HIS WIFE, MARIA FONTAINE, ARE DIRECTORS OF TFI. ■





FAITH and COMFORT ZONES

BY MARIE STORY

PEOPLE OFTEN TALK ABOUT “getting out of your comfort zone.” I hate hearing that. I confess—I like my comfort zones. I don’t like doing new things, especially things that I don’t understand or don’t think I’ll do well at. Lately, however, I’ve been pushed out of my comfort zone regularly. I think about the magnitude of some new project or venture, and I start to shrivel inside, mentally backing away.

I was discussing one such project with a friend, and he was telling me his ideas. He’s the type of person who thinks big and long-term—he’s definitely not scared off by the prospects of hard work or risks. In

1. See Romans 10:17.
2. Proverbs 3:5–6 NLT
3. See Matthew 14:22–32.
4. 2 Corinthians 3:5
5. 2 Corinthians 12:9

fact, for him, the bigger and crazier, the better. As he was laying out his plan, I automatically started feeling overwhelmed. When my eyes glazed over, he noticed.

“What’s up?”

“Well ...” I stammered, trying to look supportive, “it’s a good plan, but it seems a bit big, a bit overwhelming to me.”

“You know, *everything* seems to overwhelm you right now. Maybe you just need a bit more faith.”

That rang true, though I didn’t want to admit it.

When I talked to the Lord about it later, He confirmed that I was a bit of a wimp faith-wise. Then He gave me the following three-step faith-building plan:

1. FEED MY FAITH. Just like my body can’t survive on a diet of junk food or an occasional good meal, my

faith won’t survive, much less thrive, unless I’m faithful to take in good spiritual food.¹ When my heart is full of God’s promises, my faith won’t be easily shaken.

2. STRENGTHEN MY FAITH. Faith doesn’t grow when everything is comfortable, when all my needs are supplied, when I can handle the work on my own, or when I know what’s ahead. I do fine under those circumstances; it’s when things get difficult, when I can’t carry the load myself, when I have to hand things over to God and trust Him to do what I can’t, that’s when my faith is strengthened. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take.”² As I depend on God and put my trust in His promises, my faith will become stronger.



3. STRETCH MY FAITH. Once my faith has been strengthened, it's time to step out to do some things that seem overwhelming. In other words, get out of my comfort zone. Once again, faith doesn't have the chance to grow when everything is flowing along as usual. Sometimes difficulties and challenges come along on their own, but if I really want my faith to grow, I need to *choose* to try new things; I need to choose to be challenged; I need to choose to be stretched.

In the Bible, some people were put in difficult situations where they were forced to stretch their faith, but others took the initiative because they expected bigger things from God, and He came through for them. Some of the most incredible stuff took place when people stepped out by faith and did something that seemed crazy to everyone else.

For example, one time Jesus' disciples were in a boat several miles from shore, when Jesus went to them, walking on the water. That was a great miracle, and it strengthened the disciples' faith. But then Peter took a literal step of faith, out of the boat onto the water, going to Jesus. Peter didn't have to do that, but I'm sure it was a massive boost to his faith when he also walked on the water, if only for a moment.³

So, what's the point of stronger faith? Jesus said that faith the size of a tiny mustard seed could do great things. Sometimes that's all we can muster—faith the size of a mustard seed—but at those times He'll use what we've got. I think, though, that He doesn't want our faith to stay that tiny. I think He expects our faith to grow as we see Him come through for us time after time.

God's got big plans for each of us, and He brings situations our way to prepare us for those plans. However, it takes faith to step out, to take action, to start building on what God wants for us. If we hold back until everything seems safe, we may miss out.

One definition of faith is "confidence or trust in another's ability." Faith is knowing that we ourselves are incapable, but still doing what God asks of us because we trust in His ability to work through us. "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God."⁴ "[Jesus] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.'"⁵

MARIE STORY IS A FREELANCE ILLUSTRATOR AND DESIGNER, AND A MEMBER OF TFI IN THE U.S. ■

THE BRIGHT BOYS

BY SCOTT MACGREGOR

UNLIKE MANY OF THEIR MODERN COUNTERPARTS, it seems

that most of the bright boys throughout history had faith. How could that be? Wouldn't their exceptional ability to reason have led them to conclude that faith was illogical and naïve? Apparently not. Sure, they didn't have the benefit of knowing all that science has discovered since, but I don't think that is really the answer. Science can neither prove nor disprove matters of faith, such as the existence of God.

So did they believe because it was the norm and they caved to pressure from authority and their peers? I don't think so. Great thinkers rarely conform. They are often thorns in the sides of hidebound institutions and authorities. Their creative and incisive minds usually left authorities and peers bewildered as they performed mental gymnastics, proposed innovative theories, and solved seemingly insoluble problems.

And I am not talking only about Christians or even monotheists. Way back in ancient Egypt, a fellow named Imhotep is credited with being the first architect, engineer (he was the master builder of the first pyramids), and physician in recorded history, as well as a poet, philosopher, and the head priest of Egypt's religion. He was clearly one clever fellow, and all that he wrote that we have access to today tells us that he didn't see any incompatibility between his knowledge and his faith.

And then there are all those smart Greeks who gave us mathematics, art, democracy, philosophy, etc. Today, we might think they were pretty dumb to believe in gods and stories that don't resonate with anyone in the modern world, but they weren't just dumbly superstitious. Rather, they believed as they did because they concluded that there was a divine realm beyond what they could understand.

Consider the great Jewish thinkers Maimonides and Spinoza, both great philosophers—one more conservative, the other eminently innovative—and both believers, even if unconventional.

And of course there have been and continue to be great Christian thinkers like Thomas Aquinas and Augustine of Hippo, Leo Tolstoy, C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton, and others too numerous to list here, none of whom considered their faith a contradiction or an impediment to their soaring intellects.

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FEEDING READING

FAITH IN THE REAL WORLD



ADAPTED FROM MARIA FONTAINE

WHAT PRACTICAL BENEFITS DOES FAITH PROVIDE? Here are a few. In essence, it's a short list of God's promises.

NEW BEGINNINGS

The life which I now live ... I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.
—*Galatians 2:20*

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.—*2 Corinthians 5:17*

PEACE OF MIND

Be anxious for nothing, but ... let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.—*Philippians 4:6–7*

OVERCOMING FEAR

I sought the Lord, and He heard me, and delivered me from all my fears.—*Psalms 34:4*

Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in [God].
—*Psalms 56:3*

GUIDANCE

Cause me to know the way in which I should walk, for I lift up my soul to You.—*Psalms 143:8*

In all your ways acknowledge [God], and He shall direct your paths.—*Proverbs 3:6*

DEALING WITH ADVERSITY

I would have lost heart, unless I had believed.
—*Psalms 27:13*

With God all things are possible.—*Matthew 19:26*

SAFETY

I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in Him I will trust."—*Psalms 91:2*

SECURITY FOR THE FUTURE

I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.—*Jeremiah 29:11*

Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass.—*Psalms 37:5*

UNDERSTANDING

Please, Lord, hear my prayer and give me the understanding that comes from your word.—*Psalms 119:169 CEV*

RELIEF FROM STRESS

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul.—*Psalms 23:1–3*

PATIENCE

The testing of your faith produces patience.
—*James 1:3*

HEALING

Is anyone among you sick? The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up.
—*James 5:14–15*

To you who fear My name the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings.—*Malachi 4:2*

HAPPINESS

Our heart shall rejoice in Him, because we have trusted in His holy name.—*Psalms 33:21*

The joy of the Lord is your strength.
—*Nehemiah 8:10* ■

POINTS TO PONDER

True Values

NOTHING TRULY VALUABLE ARISES FROM AMBITION OR FROM A MERE SENSE OF DUTY; IT STEMS RATHER FROM LOVE AND DEVOTION TOWARDS MEN.

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

Mahatma Gandhi identified the seven sins in the world as wealth without work, pleasure before conscience, knowledge without character, commerce without morality, science without humanity, worship without sacrifice, and politics without principle.

We must understand spiritual truths and apply them to our modern life. We must draw strength from the almost forgotten virtues of simplicity, humility, contemplation, and prayer. It requires a dedication beyond science, beyond self, but the rewards are great and it is our only hope.

—Charles Lindbergh

The person who tries to live alone will not succeed as a human being. His heart withers if it does not answer another heart. His mind shrinks away if he hears only the echoes of his own thoughts and finds no other inspiration.

—Pearl S. Buck

Measure wealth not by the things you have, but by the things you have that you wouldn't sell for money.

—Author unknown

AN INDIVIDUAL HAS NOT STARTED LIVING UNTIL HE CAN RISE ABOVE THE NARROW CONFINES OF HIS INDIVIDUALISTIC CONCERNS TO THE BROADER CONCERNS OF ALL HUMANITY.

—MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

Life in time remains without meaning if it does not find its meaning in eternity.

—Nicolas Berdyaew

THE GREATEST USE OF LIFE IS TO SPEND IT FOR SOMETHING THAT OUTLASTS IT.

—WILLIAM JAMES

Happiness is not so much in having as sharing. We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.

—Norman MacEwan

If life be short, then moderate your worldly cares and projects; do not

cumber yourselves with too much provision for a short voyage.

—Author unknown

The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt within the heart.

—Helen Keller

LIFE BECOMES HARDER FOR US WHEN WE LIVE FOR OTHERS, BUT IT ALSO BECOMES RICHER AND HAPPIER.

—ALBERT SCHWEITZER

Jesus said, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses" (Luke 12:15). Living, the real thing, doesn't consist of things at all, because things cannot truly satisfy. They may temporarily satisfy the body but they can never satisfy the soul or the spirit that cries out to God its Father for the joy and happiness and the eternal fulfillment that only God can give.

—David Brandt Berg ■

A SPIRITUAL EXERCISE
By ABI F. MAY

The Seed of Faith

WHEN THOMAS THE APOSTLE DOUBTED THAT JESUS HAD BEEN RESURRECTED AND THAT THE OTHER DISCIPLES HAD SEEN AND TALKED WITH HIM,¹ it took seeing the Savior himself and touching the nail holes in Jesus' hands and feet to convince him. Such privileges are rare in the walk of faith. It seems that more often God wants us to believe without seeing, for which we will receive special blessings.²

Faith to believe what we cannot see can be quite a struggle, yet part of the answer is all around us. The flowers that appear in springtime, the trees laden with fruit, and every rich crop of wheat, corn, or rice all grow from comparatively small seeds.

1. John 20:25
2. John 20:29
3. NLT
4. Romans 10:17

Buried in the dark earth, nurtured by the warmth of the sun, watered by rain or the farmer, the seeds are transformed and in time become mature, full-grown plants.

That all these plants, with all their beauty and usefulness, grow from tiny seeds is an illustration of faith. In Matthew 17:20, Jesus likened faith to a mustard seed: "I tell you the truth, if you had faith even as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it would move. Nothing would be impossible."³

For this exercise, take a walk outside. Look at the flowers and plants. The beauties and mysteries of the natural world are a reflection of spiritual truths. Unless you're a botanist, you're probably not aware of every detail of the process that transforms a tiny seed into a flourishing plant. In

the same way, even if you sometimes struggle with questions of faith, your faith may very well still be alive and working.

As you walk, stop and examine some plants closely. Look at the intricate patterns. Smell the flowers. Feel the varied textures of the leaves and stems of different plants, some smoother, some rougher. Observe the shades of color and the stages of growth. Then stand back and take in the scene. Remember, all of this came from tiny seeds.

Now consider your faith. It's all right if it doesn't start off as a majestic tree. It just needs to begin as a tiny seed. Plant it, nurture it, feed it by reading God's Word,⁴ and it will grow.

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FROM JESUS WITH LOVE

I love you for who you are

Those who have learned to live in the realm of My Spirit are happy and fulfilled because they have a deep understanding of My love. They don't question My love for them, for they have experienced the height and breadth and depth of it. They have great peace and great joy. They don't waste time and energy worrying about how they measure against others, because they have found contentment in the knowledge that I love each of them for who they are. They understand that each is precious to Me. They understand that I died for each one and have redeemed each one, and therefore each one is very special to Me.

And so I want it to be with you. You are special to Me! My love for you is personal. Don't ever think that you're just one in the crowd to Me. Don't ever think that because there are so many others, I don't have time for you or that My love will run out before it reaches you.

I know your innermost longings, fears, and insecurities. I know your faults, too, and I love you just the same. I *am* love and mercy and tenderness and forgiveness and sympathy. When you struggle, when you are tempted or weary or weak, I feel for you. When you are victorious, I rejoice with you.

I love and care about you, and I am not far away. I am right there beside you. Let Me shower you with My love. Let Me surround you with the warmth of My love. Let Me clothe you with the security of My love. Let Me fill you to overflowing with My love. Let Me show you how special you are to Me.

