

## *Faith and Facts • 2 Peter 1:12-13*

Belief and doubt are usually considered to be mutually exclusive. In other words, if you truly believe then there should be no doubt; if you doubt, you are not really a believer. Except real life doesn't always have such clear lines of distinction.

There is a make-believe story you may have heard as a child:

Once upon a time a king gathered all of the staff of his castle into a large meeting room and issued a royal request. His wish was to be served a food that was as hot as summer and as cold as winter. Almost everyone told the king that this was impossible. They could serve him very hot food or very cold food but no food could be both hot and cold at the same time.

There was a teenager in the castle that day who heard the king's wish. He left the castle and climbed up to a nearby mountain and brought back a supply of ice and snow. While he melted chocolate in a pan on the stove he churned cream inside the ice. When the ice cream was ready he poured the hot fudge over it and quickly served it to the king. It was the invention of the hot fudge sundae.

Of course, this is a childhood fairy tale, but it is, in a sense, a grown-up parable as well. Sometimes we are hot and cold at the same time. Even the heat of intense faith is sometimes served up with chilling doubt.

Recognizing this reality, St. Peter wrote words of advice to first century Christians. More than three decades had passed since Peter had last seen Jesus face-to-face. By first century Roman standards Peter was an old man. He was thinking about dying. He had learned a lot about faith and doubt. He wanted to say some things to help those who lived after him. So he wrote in II Peter 1:12-15:

*So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as*

*long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things*

Peter's readers are Christians. They are neither pagans nor unbelievers. They have declared their faith and allegiance to Jesus Christ. They are firmly established in Christian truth and they want to move up to the next level of their Christian faith. So in order to help strengthen their faith he writes these words to refresh their memories.

He offers something of a recipe and the two ingredients in it are faith and facts. It's an easy recipe but the challenge is getting the right proportions. Too much faith without the right facts leads to belief in the wrong thing. Too many facts without any faith cause us to miss out on what the facts are all about. Sometimes it's hard to decide on the right mix of faith and facts.

That's the way it was for the title character in the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. He was an archaeologist, along with his father, in search of the Holy Grail, the mythical and supposedly magical cup that Jesus held at the Last Supper. The idea was that if you could find it, you would be able to have eternal life. In the process of the search, his father was shot and dying, making it even more urgent to find the Grail. At one

point Indiana Jones must step out in faith over a chasm that seemingly has not bridge in order to get to his destination. For him it becomes a struggle of faith and facts.

Peter mixes together faith and facts –or, in

other words, experience and the Bible. He tells about one of the most intense and life-shaping experiences of his own life in dealing with issues of faith in II Peter 1:16-18:

*We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we*

***Faith is experiential. We must allow God to touch each of our lives with our own individual experiences.***

*were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.*

Peter is recalling an experience that happened more than thirty years earlier. This same story appears in the biographies of Jesus in Matthew 17:1-8, Mark 9:2-9 and Luke 9:28-36. Mark's biography of Jesus, however, is very much Peter's biography of Jesus because Peter was Mark's primary resource when he did his research. When we read Mark 9 we are reading what Mark heard from Peter's eyewitness experience. Peter was the eyewitness, not Mark. Here is what Peter is referring to from Mark 9:2-9:

*After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up to a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.*

*Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)*

*Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"*

*Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.*

*As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.*

What happened here is that Peter previewed heaven. Peter saw Jesus "unwrapped" so that the God-in-him brilliantly shined through. Peter had one of the most intense, supernatural, life-changing experiences in history. It shaped his life. It fed his faith. So when he talks about this recipe of faith

and facts, he puts faith, or experience, first.

If I were writing Peter's letter I would put the facts first. That's more the way I'm wired. Show me the facts and then I'll show you my faith. It wasn't that way with Peter and it isn't that way with many others.

There is an infinite supply of stories about personal experiences with God. Some are wonderful. Some are weird. Some are downright wacko. But we need to understand that faith is always tied to personal experience with God. Those experiences are as varied as our DNA. But Christianity is never just facts. It's never just the Bible. It's never just the recitation of the Apostle's Creed. If there is no faith then a person is not a Christian. If there is no experience it is not personal. This is why we describe communion as a personal encounter with Jesus. This is why we encourage believer's baptism where we make a public confession of our own personal relationship with Jesus.

As powerful and wonderful as this call to experience is, there are some warnings and the warnings need to be heeded.

Warning #1: Don't try to copy somebody else's experience. If we try to repeat Peter's experience we will be very disappointed. Don't climb a mountain looking for Jesus surrounded by James, John, Moses and Elijah. That was for Peter, not for us. Peter does not call us to his encounter but to our own encounter with Jesus. Unfortunately, well-meaning Christians may try to impose their experience on others. They expect others to see the vision they saw, to speak in the tongue they spoke in or to experience their miracles. That misses the whole point. Faith is experiential. We must allow God to touch each of our lives with our own individual experiences.

Warning #2: Not all experiences are supernatural. Harriet Tubman is one of American's greatest heroes. Born a slave in the South she became a nurse during the Civil War, a spy and the woman who led many slaves to freedom. She lived into her 90s, dying in 1913. One of the powerful themes of her story comes from her intense Christian faith. She had a love and loyalty for Jesus Christ that was intense and shaped much of what she did.

Harriet Tubman tended to hear music and voices and have powerful visions all of her life. She would periodically fall into trances. Her biog-

raphers connect these experiences to an event early in her life. When she was about five years old Harriet was working out in a field when a male slave left the field without permission. In order to stop the slave the overseer swung a two-pound lead weight. He missed the slave and hit young Harriet with the weight, smashing her skull. This injury resulted in temporal lobe epilepsy that may well be related to hearing voices, seeing visions and entering trances.

This is not to say that God didn't use that awful injury for good. He often does that. But it is to say that her experience should not be considered normative or transferable to the spiritual experience of other Christians.

Don't try to copy someone else's experience. And, remember that not all experiences are supernatural, although they may be supernaturally used by God. Most of all, let's get the main points that Peter is making. Faith is personal. Faith is experiential. Peter's experience is not our experience nor is his faith our faith. Each of us must experience Jesus Christ for ourselves. And, experience must always be accompanied by objective facts.

Peter cites the Bible as his primary source of facts in II Peter 1:19-21:

*And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*

This is a mouthful of words loaded with teaching and truth. It refers to the Bible and asserts that what the Bible says is factual and supernatural. In other words, we have experience and truth, facts and faith. But, we need to look at the details and

here those refer to the prophets.

Prophets are those that speak God's truth to us humans. They wrote the Bible. What they wrote is the facts. These facts ratify our faith and experience. These facts are God's bright light shining in our dark world. They are the fulfillment of past predictions and give confidence in the fulfillment of still future predictions. The idea here is that we can live with the truth of the Bible and its certainty to get us through this life, and even through death, in anticipation of that time when Jesus Christ will raise the dead and we will forever be with him in heaven.

II Peter 1:19 says we have this factual truth of the Bible "until the day dawns." These four words have special interest to me because they are etched into the grave markers of my father, my brother and my grandparents in New Jersey and England. They are written on my family's grave markers as

far back as I know. They affirm faith in the facts—that what the Bible says about the past is true and that what the Bible promises for the future is true. My relatives died with the expectation of a future when a new day will dawn—the day when Jesus Christ returns to earth to raise the dead and have Christians with him forever.

Peter has one more thing to say about the facts

of the Bible in II Peter 1:20-21:

*Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*

The authors of the Bible didn't just think up what they wrote all by themselves. They didn't spin their own interpretation of history. It wasn't their opinion or imagination or choice. They didn't make up a religion. They spoke what God had to say. They wrote with the authority and accuracy of the Holy Spirit

The Bible is the most studied and documented book in history. What it says has been studied, dis-

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sected, analyzed, attacked, criticized and verified for 2,000 years. There isn't time to present and explain all of this here and now. If you want proof there are plenty of books, classes and scholars to help you out. We regularly bring these resources to Wooddale Church. The bottom line is that this is a book of facts. This is the word of God. It is the truth.

Put it all together and we have the transforming twins of faith and facts, experience and the Bible. Together they form the two pillars upon which Christianity stands. Being a Christian is not just having an experience. Being a Christian is not just the truth of the Bible. Being a Christian is faith *and* facts; being a Christian is experience *and* the Bible.

Author Richard Exley tells the story of a pastor whose son committed suicide. Ten days later he returned to the congregation he served and read these words from Romans 8:28: "*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*" The pastor was visibly shaken as he read these words. Then he said, "I cannot make my son's suicide fit into this passage. It's impossible for me to see how anything good could come out of it. Yet I realize that I only see in part. I only know in part." Fighting for composure, he went on:

"It's like the miracle of the shipyard. Almost every part of our great ocean-going vessels are made of steel. If you take any single part—be it a steel plate out of the hull or a huge rudder—and throw it into the ocean, it will sink. Steel doesn't float! But when the shipbuilders are finished, when the last plate has been riveted in place, then that massive steel ship is virtually unsinkable.

"Taken by itself, my son's suicide is senseless. Throw it into the sea of Romans 8:28, and it sinks. Still, I believe that when the Eternal Shipbuilder has finally finished, when God has worked out his perfect design, even this senseless tragedy will somehow work to our eternal good."

In the midst of despair, this Christian father understood what Peter taught us at the end of II Peter 1. Faith and facts. Experience and truth. Us and the Bible. Sometimes our experiences soar to heights of happiness. Sometimes they crush us with grief. If it were just experience we would yo-yo through life. But then God gives us the best of both. God meets us in our agonies and our ecstasies with the truth of his word and God shapes our Christian lives and grows us to be more like Jesus.

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