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How Faith Works

A C A S E S T U D Y

BY SKIP MACCARTY

I have always been fascinated with how faith works in a person's life. According to the Bible, when we come in to this world at birth, no one is good or even seeks God (Romans 3:10–12). It says we're spiritually dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1). If that's true, then how does anyone ever go from no faith in God to having such a passionate faith in God that they'd be willing to face ridicule and even martyrdom for Him?

It seems to me that there are three stages in the inception, growth and development of faith. The first is the inception, or divine intervention, stage.

INCEPTION STAGE (DIVINE INTERVENTION)

Saul was intent on eradicating the followers of Jesus, whom he considered to be a charlatan and blasphemer. But then came the divine intervention—a blinding light and the audible voice of Jesus (Acts 9). The rest of that story is history.

On a recent flight to the Montana camp meeting I sat by Anna, who had an undergraduate degree in cosmology and is now working on a Ph.D. in the history of science. I love science so we talked all the way. At some point intelligent design came up. She informed me that she's an atheist.

That gave me a chance to share with Anna something I learned 40 years ago to share with atheists: There's a lot of things about life and the Bible that I don't fully understand. But a dominant theme of the Bible is that one day every one of us will stand before God in a final judgment and will give an account for the few years we were granted on this earth. At that time we will look back and see countless times that God had intervened in our lives to assure us that He's real and that He loves us and wants us to believe in Him and become a follower of His Son Jesus. The only thing that will matter then is how we responded to those divine interventions and invitations He gave us to believe in Him and to be restored to the eternal destiny He's planned for us.

That's a powerful truth for all of us. Someday at the final judgment we will look back and see it all so clearly. Today God is saying: No need to wait until that someday, when it will be too late to do anything about it. Today is that someday for you.

God may have intervened in your life through your parents, or a Christian friend, or some dramatic event that has occurred in your life. But whatever it was, or is, or will be, you will recognize it and have a sense that it was an intervention and invitation from God. "The sinner may resist this love, may refuse to be drawn to Christ; but if he does not resist, he will be drawn to Jesus; a knowledge of the plan

of salvation will lead him to the foot of the cross in repentance for his sins, which have caused the sufferings of God's dear Son" (*Steps to Christ*, p. 27).

For some people God's intervention is dramatic, like the apostle Paul's. But it's not that way for everyone.

Two colts are born. One is born in the wild and runs wild until he's caught and taken to a corral. One morning a trained horseman throws a saddle over the horse's back, and there's a lot of commotion. By the end of a long, hard day the horse and his rider are trotting peacefully around the corral. You can mark on the calendar the day that horse was broken.

The other colt is born on a farm that has children who love animals. Within a few weeks the children are playing with the horse and beginning to crawl on its back. It becomes a wonderful riding horse. How do you calculate when that horse was broken?

Jesus told Nicodemus, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). The Spirit of God sometimes intervenes like a whirlwind and a blinding light. But sometimes He comes like a gentle breeze, through the wise, consistent teaching of a godly parent or the quiet, loving influence of a Christian friend. There are dramatic conversions to Christ, and there are conversions that take place almost imperceptibly over a period of time. "A person may not be able to tell the exact time or place, or trace all the chain of circumstances in the process of conversion; but this does not prove him to be unconverted" (*Steps to Christ*, p. 57).

INCUBATION STAGE

The second step in how faith works is the incubation stage, the phase where faith grows and becomes more settled.

Paul didn't become a great spokesman for the gospel overnight. While he began to share the story of his conversion with believers immediately, he also realized that his own newborn faith needed some time for incubation and growth to be strengthened in the word of God. So he went to Arabia for a significant Sabbatical time to restudy the Scriptures to ground his new faith deeply in the word of



God and to prepare to defend it against critics (Galatians 1:13–18). And it appears from his writings that he never stopped studying the Scriptures and gaining ever new insights into the work and ministry of Jesus. He had a passion to learn more and more about Jesus.

Part of Paul's spiritual growth was the revolution in his thinking that his acceptance with God, his standing before God and his security with God was not based on the fact that he had been born into the true church or had lived up to all the rules of the church or all the commands of the Bible. It was based on what Jesus had done for him in the life He had lived, and the death He had died for Paul's sins, and in His ongoing ministry in Heaven in Paul's behalf. Paul called this Jesus' righteousness (Philippians 3:4–9).

To put it in our Adventist vernacular, Paul used to think that you could be justified before God if you drank whole milk. To be sanctified you needed to drink skim milk. To be glorified, soy milk. And to be qualified for translation, well that's reserved for those who've graduated to unsweetened soy milk. (We drink unsweetened soy milk at our house, so I'm just trying to understand Paul's message through my own experience.)

But what Paul learned from restudying the Scriptures and growing in his faith is that his standing before God had nothing whatsoever to do with the kind of milk he drank. But it had everything to do with the cup of suffering that Jesus drank in his behalf. And it had everything to do with Paul's faith in Jesus and in God's grace and mercy extended to him in Jesus.

That understanding of the gospel came through times of meditation on God's word and prayer. And this understanding and conviction continued to strengthen throughout his life. The study of the word of God and the practice of prayer is a school from which we never graduate, a school that under the supervision of the Holy Spirit grows our faith.

It seems like the older I get the more I have to do and

the longer it takes me to do it. This means it's harder than ever to get that thoughtful hour each day to commune with Jesus.

But here's something I've learned during my 65 years. I have to choose an hour as early in the day as I possibly can, slap a "do not trespass" sign on it, and consider it the School of Christ. It's not the only place I meet Jesus in my day. But something happens in that 60-minute classroom session communing with the Holy Spirit that can't be duplicated any other way. That quiet hour is the prime real estate of my day. I can't afford to let anything encroach on it.

Telephone rings? No trespassing. Computer chimes that I have new mail? No trespassing. Remember something I have to do today? Have my to-do list or a Post-it note by my side and write it down so it's not competing in my head with my communion with God. Oh, and another thing, I can't have any exposure to media (television, radio, newspaper, etc.) before I've spent time alone with God. If what the Bible says about Heaven and eternal life are true, then God has to have prime time in my day.

MISSION STAGE

The third stage of how faith works and grows is the mission stage. Genuine faith always leads to mission.

Upon recognizing it was Jesus involved in the blinding light intervention, Paul's first words were, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" (Acts 9:3–6) Once a person comes to faith in God, the very next question should be, "Lord, what do you want me to do?" That's faith's question. It's how faith works.

In his book, *Ten Prayers God Always Answers*, Anthony DeStefano writes that the prayer God always answers the fastest, says yes to most consistently, and answers with the most pleasure is, "God, make me an instrument to carry out some important mission of mercy for you." I don't know how the author came to that conclusion, but it wouldn't surprise me if he's right.



Paul was a master craftsman at making and repairing tents, and he often earned his living that way. But his heart wasn't in tent making, it was in the mission Jesus gave him "to turn [hearts] from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God." That was his passion.

Once you respond to God's interventions in your life and you put your faith in Jesus and become a Christian, you're ready to be used by God as one of His divine interventions in the lives of other people He brings across your path. Stage two, the incubation and growth stage of your faith will progress side by side with stage three, the mission stage of your faith. Every day of your life in Christ is a growth-in-faith day and a mission day.

Anna, the atheist grad student I sat next to on the way to Montana, was on her way to the funeral of a very close relative, and she wasn't handling it very well. I had my Bible with me and asked her permission to read to her the Bible's only funeral sermon. She seemed fascinated as I read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, and she asked several questions about it. Before we landed I asked her what she thought the chances were that she would be on her way to a hard funeral for her and be randomly seated next to someone prepared to read her the Bible's funeral sermon. She responded, "I was just thinking that myself."

That was a divine intervention, and I got to be part of it! She gave me her mailing address, so I could send her a book she told me she would read, and we've corresponded several times since.

Recently Grace, my 14-year-old granddaughter, and I visited her 96-year-old grandmother, Corlin Halsey, during an extended stay in the hospital in Alma, Michigan. Grandma Corlin had a TV in her room, but I noticed that it wasn't on when we came in. I asked her if she watched it some to pass the time a little easier. She said, "No." I asked Grandma Corlin what she did during those long, lonely days when she was just laying in bed. She told me she prayed. Grandma

Corlin said she wasn't lonely at all because the Lord was always with her.

What struck me was that Grandma Corlin, bedridden day after day, recognized that God was keeping her alive for a reason. She couldn't be a physical intervention in people's lives for God at this point. But being bedridden couldn't keep her from a mission of praying for people. And if we can believe what Jesus taught about the role of prayer in the Great Controversy between Christ and Satan, we know that a prayer from that little, seemingly insignificant, hospital bed can influence events and divine interventions that are taking place in lives halfway around the world.

That experience reminded me again that God isn't impressed with our excuses. Don't try to tell Him that you're too shy or too uneducated or too poor or too disabled or too old or too busy to make a difference. He has accomplished many divine interventions through many busy people, and shy people, and uneducated people, and untalented people, and not-so-good-looking people, and disabled people and shut-ins. God loves to use the "weak" as resources through which He intervenes in the lives of the "strong" to invite them to faith and salvation.

If you're a Christian and still alive, you have a mission.

Maybe you've prayed the prayer, "Lord, what would you have me to do?" or "What is my mission?" and you feel like you haven't gotten an answer. But God wants you to be assured that if you will pray that prayer sincerely every day, and ask to be anointed by the Holy Spirit for whatever He has for you that day, you can then go into the day with the expectation that God will work through your life to accomplish divine interventions that will make an eternal difference in the lives of others. Whether you can see the difference it's making or not, He wants you to trust Him on this one.

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