

THE FAVORITE TEXT OF FAMOUS PEOPLE - J. Irwin Miller

“Faith In Long Pants”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

2 Cor. 5:7

A friendly argument with a former pastor forced one of the richest men in America to take a fresh look at his faith. Prior to that time, J. Irwin Miller, an eminently successful industrialist and banker, had pretty much accepted religion as a matter of course. He knew the principles of sound economics in and out, but he was less literate in matters of the Spirit. As a result of the examination to which he subjected his faith, Irwin Miller became intensely interested in theology and deeply committed to the Kingdom of God.

An influential member of the Disciples of Christ denomination, this splendid layman not only engages in Christian service on a national level, but also serves as a substitute Sunday School teacher in his home church. However, he is not a “Sunday-go-to-meeting” Christian.

“There is no area in life which should not be governed by Christian principles,” he asserts. “Christianity should speak out to labor leaders, business leaders, politicians, lawyers and bankers.”

Following that ideal, he has carried his Christian convictions into his own labor-management relations with most happy results. He claims,

“I wouldn’t know how to run a big company without a strong union.

A union has to be strong and responsible.”

“Time” magazine estimates his personal fortune at \$500 million, but Miller is no ordinary capitalist. It is his deep conviction that every man should use whatever wealth is his “to change things for the better.” As a demonstration of this he has given millions of dollars to various church and charity needs.

In response to a request for a statement regarding his favorite text, this lean and lanky

personification of Christian laity in action wrote the following letter --

“Dear Dr. Lavender,

Thank you for your letter of December 19. I have always been fond of the words of Paul, ‘For we walk by faith and not by sight.’ These words are capable of a broad variety of searching and helpful interpretation in supporting persons of all ages and circumstances. With best wishes, I am,

Very Sincerely yours,

Erwin Miller.”

I don’t suppose a day ever passes but what the conscientious minister wishes the precious commodities with which he deals were not so imponderable. One of the great riddles of life is that real things often seem unreal.

Many times I have sat across my desk from someone perplexed by life’s vexing trials and wished I could cut off three or four yards of faith and wrap it around her for protection against the storm she was facing.

On other occasions I have often stood in a hospital room at the bedside of one facing serious surgery and wished with all my heart I could pump a pint or two of courage into his veins.

Often, I have chatted with a teenager whose every outward action was evidence of an inward hunger for affection and approval, and wished I could weigh out a pound of love and present it to that young person as sustenance for his or her starving spirit.

Unfortunately, it can’t be done. And yet, these imponderables, these precious commodities of the Spirit with which I deal -- faith, love, courage, forgiveness and hope -- are “things” which, in the ultimate sense, really matter. These are they which empower us to conquer.

It takes courage to storm a fortress. It takes love to mount a cross. It takes faith to stand beside an open grave and hope. These are the real things in life, and while they are difficult to define with words, they are easy to recognize in action. And, even though they can not be weighed on a scale, or measured by a ruler, we know when we have them, and we know when we don’t.

Just because something cannot be seen, or heard, or felt, is no proof it does not exist. The fact it is an imponderable does not mean it is unreal. At this very moment this sanctuary is filled with noise. We are actually surrounded by a veritable din of conflicting harmonies. We are sitting in the center of a wild and harsh dissonance.

Right now some magnificent organ somewhere is filling this room with the majestic chords of a Bach chorale.

Right now a raspy-voiced huckster is jamming the air waves with the promise of “the greatest deal ever” on a brand new jet mobile.

“Come on, pastor!” you say, “I can’t hear them.” No, but if you turned on a radio and began to sweep its dial you could. From the stirring strains of a Beethoven symphony, to the frantic beat of the latest rock-n-roll platter, they would all be heard. The fact that you cannot hear them at this moment does not negate their existence. It simply means that at this moment you are not meeting the conditions required for their being heard.

It’s the same with this precious intangible we call faith. Faith is just as real as the unheard sounds in your room. You only need to meet the required conditions before it can be yours in all its transforming power.

How do you meet them? By resting your faith on a foundation of fact. And here you have a decided advantage over pilgrims from the past. Consider, for instance, how little those first disciples knew about Jesus. When you stop to think about it, it’s amazing they followed him at

all. He made such incredible claims which, at first, seemed to have so little basis in fact. But they started with what understanding they had, and went on from there.

As Frank Laubach says,

“They were captivated by a magnetic personality and, by faith, decided to walk with him and see what he would do. After they had followed him for a few months, their hearts felt a tremendous love, and their minds found a tremendous truth.”

Or look at Abraham, the patriarch. How little he knew about God. Far less than the disciples. Yet, upon so tiny an island of fact, he built a great empire of faith. So much so, he is called “the father of faith!” What a rich legacy we have inherited from him and many others. Because of them, ours need not be blind faith. We have a fortune of fact upon which a sure foundation can be built.

Contrary to the assertion of some, faith is not opposed to reason. Actually, it is *based* on reason! It just goes beyond it. It supplements it. It is reason -- plus. The cycle of events in an adventure of spiritual pioneering is first fact, then faith, then feeling.

Let me show you what I mean. Suppose a man is crossing the ocean and the ship on which he is sailing is suddenly enveloped by a terrible storm. He becomes desperately afraid and rushes up to a sailor asking if the boat will sink. The sailor, an old salt and a survivor of many such storms, laughs hilariously at the question, and makes a joke of the whole idea.

Which of the two is safer? The man gripped by terror, or the sailor with carefree, almost casual, assurance? Neither! They are both in the same boat! Their safety does not depend upon their feelings, but upon the facts of physics which sustain the boat in which they have put their faith.

It's the same in a venture of the spirit. Your security does not rest on your feelings, which

fluctuate from time to time. Nor does it rest on your faith, which at times is strong, and at other times grows feeble and dim. Your security rests first, last, and always, on one great fact. One dynamic truth which gives faith, power, direction and meaning. What is that fact? “God is love!” (1 Jn. 4:8).

Do you need proof?

Look at the world about you and see in its matchless provisions how, through the love of God, your every physical need has been supplied.

Look at the Bible, and discover in its precious truths how, through the love of God, every longing of your seeking mind is met.

Look at Jesus Christ and see in his beautiful life and sacrificial death how, through the love of God, every desire of your spiritually starving soul is satisfied.

God is love! With patient persistence he seeks to make himself, and his love, known to you.

The longer I live the more I marvel at the great lengths to which God goes to accomplish this.

Witness such things as a radiant sunset. A fruit tree in blossom. A child rollicking at play.

These are not essential to life.

The sun could fulfill its task of making things grow without putting on such a dazzling performance at gloaming.

The fruit tree could nourish us without bursting forth in such beauty.

The child could carry on the chain of life without those ripples of laughter which make our hearts sing.

Why, then, all this glory, this beauty, this radiance? Because, through these over and above gifts, God makes his love known to us. He places them here in the hope that, through the insight of faith, all people, everywhere, will recognize them to be revelations of God’s love. Gateways, if you will, at which they can begin their march toward truth.

Grace Curry of Lincoln, Nebraska, recognized this when she wrote,

“You speak to me in the sunset, Lord.

 In the dark of the sky at night;

 In the lilting song of the Cardinal,

 In the Martin’s daring flight.

 In the cool, wet kiss of a raindrop,

 In the warmth of the sun’s caress,

 In the blue of the sky, in the green of the grass,

 You fill me with happiness.

 In the flaming color of leaves in the fall,

 In the white of the winter’s snow,

 In the twitter of sleepy birds at night,

 Your love for me you show.

 In the flickering light of a candle’s beam,

 In the organ’s loud ‘Amen,’

 In the words our loved ones say to us,

 You speak again and again.

‘O thank you God,’ our hearts cry loud,

 ‘O thank you, Father most high,

These are glimpses of heaven on earth,

 We see, as you pass by.””

God is love! And with patient persistence he seeks to make himself, and his love, known to you.

Bishop William F. McDowell never tired of telling of an incident which happened about the turn of the century.

Electricity had only recently come into its own, and for the first time, in many cities, light bulbs were replacing kerosene lamps. One evening while visiting friends in New York, he was invited to see a spectacular electrical display which had been set up in that city. He recounts in vivid language the tremendous impression this great spectacle made upon him. How, as he watched the dazzling array of brilliant lights, he said almost in a whisper, “Isn’t it wonderful?”

His friend, standing at his side, replied softly, “Yes, it reminds me of the patience of God.”

“Why?” asked the bishop. “What is there about this glorious display, even in all its magnificence, that reminds you of the patience of God?”

The man answered, “Because for centuries people groped around in darkness with their lamps and bits of tallow, while all the time God in his great heaven has patiently flashed his lightning across the sky as if saying to the world,

‘Look here! See what I have for you if you will only take it.

Come out of your darkness and receive my light.’

And then one day someone reached up into the heavens and pulled it down.

They harnessed the power of God, and tonight our cities and homes are flooded with light.

“Similarly, for the last two-thousand years people have groped about in spiritual darkness, vainly searching amid the tallow and wicks of the world for some faint light to guide them. All the while God in his tender patience has been flashing the eternal light of his love as it radiates from the cross of Christ, his son, crying,

‘Look here! See what I have for you if you’ll only take it. Come out of your darkness and take my light!’

To me, it is the puzzlement of the ages that all rational, responsible human beings do not race at once to the foot of the cross, in gracious acceptance of God’s love

gift in Jesus.”

Unfortunately, they don’t. There are still those who, in spite of Christ’s cross, are not yet persuaded that God is love. To them he is a swirl of clouds in the heavens. Grey and formless. Or, they see him as a figure of titanic proportions sitting heavily on a massive throne, raining down fury upon poor quaking souls with the voice of thunder and soul of fire. Or, on the more soothing side, they see him as a white-haired grandfather too weary from running the universe to be roused from his rocking chair when they might need him.

What sad caricatures of that One whom Jesus called “father.” But, as Pascal observed,

“It is the pathetic fate of God to be everlastingly misunderstood.”

If God is concerned about that, his concern is not for himself, but for those who misunderstand him. *They* are the ones who suffer, for everything a person is, and does, relates to his or her understanding of God.

A little boy who had gone to bed upstairs was awakened by a nightmare, cried out in fear and came running down to his mother. He was frightened by the dark, by shadows, by all kinds of imaginary goblins that were going to “get him.” His mother calmed him and then said, “Honey, you don’t have to be afraid. God is up there with you. He will protect you.” The lad started back up the stairs, courage in hand. Just as he got to the top, his mother heard him say, “Now God, if you’re up here, please don’t move or you’ll scare me half to death!”

A lot of folks are like that little boy. They have an image of God which is vague and confused. As a result, they deprive themselves of the creative and sustaining power of what I call faith in long pants. Faith which has outgrown the knee-breeches of childish naivete.

When Charles Haddon Spurgeon visited a friend in the country he noticed the words, “God is love” written on a weather vane atop the barn. Spurgeon inquired, “Don’t you think that is an inappropriate instrument to carry such a message? A weather vane is such a changeable thing.”

"That's the point," replied his friend, "I placed it there as a constant reminder that, any way the wind blows, God is love!" He was right. God's love is the incontestable fact of history. Once you open up to it, you will find God's love to be a sure foundation upon which to build your faith.

A number of years ago, while living in Chicago, I looked out of my study window one day. It was lunch time and the children were hurrying home from Clissold school. As I watched them from my second-story vantage point, I saw one little girl decked out in a bright red hat, coat and leggings. I had no difficulty in distinguishing her from the others. It was our first born, Jodi, who, at that time, was seven years old.

I saw her swing around the telephone pole at the corner. I saw her grip the hand of a little school chum and help him across the street. I saw her try valiantly to jump over a puddle of water on the sidewalk and land with a splash right in the middle of it, and then, with the nonchalance of a little child, skip on toward home.

She didn't know I was watching. She didn't hear my prayer when I said,

"God bless and protect that little girl, because I love her and need her."

She didn't see me. She didn't hear me. She didn't feel my presence. But I was there just the same. Watching from my second-story office window. Surrounding her with all the love I feel in my father heart.

That's the way it is with God and us. "We walk by faith and not by sight." We cannot see him. We cannot hear his voice. We find it hard at times to feel his presence. But he is there just the same! Watching our every step, smiling at our childish antics, for as a father loves and cares for his children, so, too, God loves and cares for those of us who are his own.

When that fact lays hold of you, faith takes on new meaning. It ceases to be blind, unreasoned superstition. It becomes real, not by closing your eyes, but by opening them to behold those realities you did not see at first glance. It means waking up to the fact of God's unfailing love, and

letting the *fact* of if it grip your entire being.

Faith is not stained glass word. It is not limited to church windows. Instead, as Dr. V. Carney Hargroves points out,

“Faith is a word which gets out into the streets, rides the trolley cars, does business in banks, cooks food and mends clothes for the family, goes to school and college, sustains marriage and creates friendships. Faith is the element in life which enables people to keep choosing the right when there are countless expedient, profitable reasons for choosing the wrong.”

No, faith is not a stained-glass word. It is not easy escapism from responsibility. It is not a lazy man’s retreat from reality. It is a means by which we *know*, and a method by which we live.

You can have faith like that. It will not require a special act of God.

It does not require a special act of God for a bird to fly. That power is within a fledgling, and she only needs to use it.

It did not take a special act of God for the Israelites to claim the promised land. They only had to go in and possess it.

It does not take a special act of God for a flower to grow. The seed only needs to be put into the ground, and given sunshine and water.

Even so, it will not take a special act of God for you to “walk by faith and not by sight.” That possibility is within you. You only need to feed the mustard seed size of your faith with the water and “faith-food” of God’s promises, and expose it to the sunshine of communion with Christ. In time, it will blossom into a reality marked by certainty

A little girl was learning the multiplication table at school. At the behest of her grandfather she began to perform. When she got to twelve times twelve she stopped.

“What’s thirteen times thirteen?” the grandfather asked.

Turning on him with scorn in her eyes she said,

“Don’t be silly, Grandpa. There is no such thing.”

As far as her limited knowledge went, she was right. She had not yet climbed past the dizzy heights of twelve times twelve. But thirteen times thirteen is still there! Many people are like that little girl in matters of the Spirit. Perhaps you are among them. When you hear others talk of walking by faith and not by sight you say, “There is no such thing.” And, as far as your limited experience goes, you are right. You never have climbed past sight to *insight*. You are a spiritually landlocked soul who never has lived in the deeps. You have not learned that life is not limited to what you can see. That “out there beyond, beyond your eye’s horizon, there is more, much more.” I’m here this morning to say *that* blessed and abundant more can be yours, if in faith you look to Christ.

Somewhere in New York City there hangs a painting which I hope one day to see. It pictures a group of people climbing up a very steep hill. There are rocks and briars along the way. Judging from the bruises on their feet and the tears in their clothing, it has been a hard climb. Over the brow of the hill, where the people cannot see it, lies the beautiful city of God. I am told that drawing upon every bit of talent at his command, the artist has made it one of the most beautiful paintings of heaven on canvas.

The question which comes to mind as you think about the picture is, “How do the people know they are going in the right direction to reach the city of God?” The artist provides the answer. Up in the corner of the painting, above the unseen city, he has put the face of Jesus shining through the clouds. The people know that as long as they keep their eyes on Jesus, they are moving in the right direction.

Are you facing one of life’s Gethsemanes? Are you struggling to maintain your equilibrium in the face of the twentieth-century version of the four horsemen of the apocalypse: fear, frustration, frenzy and futility? Then walk by faith awhile. With that splendid inner vision of the soul,

“Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in his wonderful face;

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of his glory and grace.”