

A Study in 2 Timothy 1:5–7

Unfeigned Faith — The Gift of God — Stir Up the Flame — April 16, 2008

We are reading 2 Timothy chapter 1, beginning at verse 5.

"When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also."

"Wherefore I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God, which is in thee by the putting on of my hands. For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind."

Accept No Substitutes — Feigned and Unfeigned Faith

The phrase unfeigned faith is an unusual one. Faith in itself is real — it does not ordinarily require an adjective to assert its reality. If we find that Scripture speaks of unfeigned faith in a day of decline and ruin, it is because the day itself demands the distinction. In a time when profession has become widespread, when the mustard tree of Christendom has grown into a monster, when men have a form of godliness while denying the power thereof (2 Timothy 3:5), the question has to be asked of every display of faith: is this the real thing? The fact that one has to ask the question at all is itself a mark of the Laodicean age. In the bright days of Acts 2, one did not have to say of a conversion: that was real faith. Of course it was faith. One simply said: they believed. It is in a day of ruin that one has to say, now that — that is real.

Joshua 9 provides the most detailed Old Testament illustration of feigned faith. When the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and Ai, they sent men who made as if they had been ambassadors from a far country — with old sacks, old rent and patched wine skins, dry and mouldy bread, old garments, and worn-out shoes. Their claim: we have come from a very far country. The truth: they lived very near. And the men of Israel took of their provisions and asked not counsel at the mouth of the Lord, and Joshua made peace with them and a league to let them live.

The bread was dry and mouldy — leavened and rotting. Leaven in Scripture always speaks of that which corrupts. If someone comes to the Lord's table with unjudged leaven in his life, with corruption not brought to the light and dealt with, he comes like the Gibeonites with their mouldy bread. The wine skins were torn — the joy had run out. In 1 Corinthians 11:18, Paul writes of schisms in the assembly. The word means tears or rents. Where there are rents, the wine of joy drains out. The Gibeonites brought their torn bottles as evidence of a long journey; they did not judge them. What we have in verse

5 of 2 Timothy stands in contrast to all of that: unfeigned faith. A pure loaf, unleavened, new. Full wine skins. A clean walk and a testimony to the Lord Jesus. That is what the dark day calls for.

The Tense — Has Been, Not Was

Mr. Darby in his translation renders the expression calling to mind the unfeigned faith which has been in thee. He was careful about this in a footnote: is affirms it is now, whereas has been might seem to imply discouragement, while was would suggest the faith is gone. He settled on has been because if something has been there, it still is. The faith is present. And this precision is important, because given the context — Timothy apparently needing to be stirred up, the darkening all around — one might easily misread a past tense as suggesting that Timothy's faith had faded. That is not what Paul is saying. He is persuaded of it. He calls to mind the faith which has been in Timothy and still is.

The Grandmother's Faith — and What It Cannot Do

When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice — this opens a question worth pressing. The faith dwelt first in the grandmother. What does that tell us about Timothy's great-grandmother? It tells us she was a lost soul — because the faith dwelt first in Lois, not before her. The line did not go back indefinitely. It began with Lois.

That observation is instructive, because one might take the passage to mean that faith is inherited, or that having a praying grandmother is what gives faith. But John 1:12–13 corrects that immediately: to them that believe on his name, who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. Not of blood — family lineage does not convey faith. Not of the will of the flesh — my own sincerely seeking heart does not produce it. Not of the will of man — no one else's intercessory will on my behalf produces it either. But of God. It comes from God alone, and it is His gift.

Why then does Paul mention Lois and Eunice? Not to suggest that Timothy owes his faith to them. It is because their faith was unfeigned. It was visible. Anyone could see it. It was the kind of faith that you observe and say: that is real. And Timothy had grown up with those examples before him every day. That creates a responsibility. A child who grows up in a home where unfeigned faith is displayed, and who rejects the Lord, has a greater responsibility before God than one who never had that example. And for Timothy, who did have the same faith — Paul says I am persuaded that in thee also — the example was both an encouragement and a standard.

Furthermore, there is a remarkable thing here. The subject of this epistle is energy in a day of decline. In that same declining day, in those same assemblies where all they in Asia had turned away — yet in

one family, faith was still there. Lois had it. Eunice had it. Timothy had it. Someone might say, it is all over, everything is ruined, nothing remains. The apostle Paul would answer: your grandmother had unfeigned faith. Your mother had unfeigned faith. And I am persuaded you have it. It has not been extinguished by the ruin. God is still at work.

I Am Persuaded That in Thee Also

Paul does not say to Timothy: you have responsibilities. He says: I am persuaded that in thee also. There is a difference. Man always fails under responsibility — that is the uniform testimony of Scripture from the Garden of Eden onward. What does not fail is faith, because faith is looking to God and to the Lord. And in a day of ruin, what keeps us is not our sense of duty but the faith that lays hold of what God has done and what He has promised.

When Paul writes to Timothy, I am persuaded that in thee also, he is not offering a vague compliment. He is stating something he believes to be true, with the authority of an apostle who knows Timothy's character. And if Timothy had been discouraged, if the gift in him had been smoldering low, if he had been occupied more with the departure all around him than with the faith he himself possessed — then to read in a letter from the Apostle Paul that the greatest living servant of the Lord Jesus was persuaded of his faith — that ought to have shocked him. And then encouraged him. I am persuaded you have faith. Now stir it up.

The Gift of God — Not Natural Ability, Not Seminary Learning

Verse 6: I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God which is in thee by the putting on of my hands. Three things are distinguished by what this verse does not say. It does not say, stir up the natural ability that is in thee. Every human being is a created being, and natural abilities can be attributed to God as Creator — but that is not what Paul is speaking of. It does not say, stir up what thou hast learned. Timothy had sat at the feet of the apostle and learned the things that Paul had been taught by revelation. But that learning is not the gift of God referenced here. And it does not say, stir up what thou hast earned or developed by effort. The gift of God is given, not earned. It came by the putting on of Paul's hands — apostolic authority conferring what God had appointed for Timothy's service.

In Christendom, the pattern has been to take a man, educate him in a seminary, teach him a body of doctrine and technique, and send him out to teach others. But the question is never raised in a seminary: what is the gift that the Spirit of God has actually given you? The formula — learn a body of facts, master a set of skills, go out and apply them — is the very thing Paul does not say. He says: stir up the gift of God which is in thee. The gift precedes the teaching. The gift is its own source. What is imparted to others through that gift is alive, because it comes from the living Source. What is passed on by a man

who has learned but not been gifted can only be information. It cannot produce what only God can produce.

In Romans 12:6–8, the gifts given to the body are listed: prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, ruling, mercy. Each one is to be exercised according to the grace given. These are gifts from God, not capacities developed by effort. Having then gifts differing according to the grace given to us — there is the principle. And in the darkening state of the church, what is needed is the unfeigned gift of God at work, not the feigned gift of man's self-appointment.

Rekindle the Gift — Stir Up the Fire

The word translated stir up in the King James is rendered rekindle by Darby — and that is more vivid. It is the image of a fire that has burned down. The coals are still there, there is still life in them, but the flame has diminished. You take a poker, you stir the coals, you knock off the ash, and the flame leaps up again. The fire was not dead. It needed to be stirred. That is what Paul is asking Timothy to do with the gift of God in him.

The implication is clear: the gift of God does not operate itself. It will not maintain itself without exercise. If left unstirred, it will settle down and be smothered by the ash. Every Christian has some gift, often smaller than one imagines — for men are prone to think their gift larger than it is. But whatever the size of the gift, there is a responsibility to put it into operation. Otherwise it smolders. The stirring is the Christian's responsibility. But the fire itself is from God. No one can manufacture that flame. All we can do is stir what He has given and not allow it to go out through neglect.

The laying on of Paul's hands was an expression of apostolic authority, unique to Paul's relationship with Timothy. But more broadly, the laying on of hands in the New Testament expresses fellowship — Barnabas and Saul were commended to their work in Antioch by the elders laying hands on them, expressing fellowship with them in that work. In a darkening state of the church, such expressed fellowship is like a candle in a dark place. It is both encouraging and a source of light. To have another believer say to you: I fellowship with you in what you are doing for the Lord — that is a strengthening thing. And Paul's whole letter to Timothy is that kind of strengthening word: I am persuaded of your faith; I remember you in my prayers night and day; rekindle the gift of God in you; God has not given us a spirit of fear but of power and love and a sound mind.

*Rekindle the gift of God which is in thee — for God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power,
and of love, and of a sound mind.*