



The Secret Means of Faith

Genesis 1:9-23; Ps 20; Mark 4:26-34; 2 Corinthians 5:6-17

The Aztecs and Maya made human sacrifices to urge the sun's return from winter. The Druids celebrated the winter solstice with similar purpose. The Lakota, Egyptians, Romans, Greeks, and Babylonians all were involved in special rites to call on or celebrate the sun's return. They were afraid that the sun might remain on a permanent winter holiday or keep traveling northward, condemning life on earth. Genesis paints a very different picture. Here, the sun, moon, and stars are objects in the sky, set in the firmament to mark off times and seasons. They are not entities controlling seasons at a whim.

Genesis never explains how God created, but it establishes a very distinct theological premise: God has created the world in a system of order, whereby the seasons are not subject to flights of fancy by the deities the nations worship. Patterns of season, night, and day were established in the framework of *Yahweh's* created order far beyond the reach of such gods or the fear motivating their worship. It is telling that the text calls the sun and moon "two great lights." This gives them no sense of persona and robs them of the common mystical associations made to them. God set them in their places, not as beings, but as physical structures in the realm of creation.

More than that, however, the earth was created fertile, filled with self-replicating life. God engineered plants and animals to reproduce after their own kind, not necessitating any special intervention to bring fertility. God created a fertile earth. Fertility is in its very DNA, as we might say today. Fertility practices of the Ancient Near East and witch doctors preying on albinos are thus set aside in Genesis as pointless. There is no need to anxiously worry over processes we do not understand, yet are established by God. Genesis does not tell us how, it just tells us who set it all in motion. *Yahweh* is the only one worthy of our worship as Creator and sustainer of life. It is to God our reverence is due, not the objects of his handiwork.

There is something of this concept behind Jesus' words in Mark 4. We don't have to understand how faith works and grows in the silence of the hidden realms of our lives. We need simply to heed the purposes of faith and give our lives wholeheartedly to the purposes of the One bringing its growth. We know that the mustard seed is designed to become more than a tiny speck. We know that it was created to transform into a plant large enough to house a nest for the very birds that would eat it. We need not understand the process to know the seed's purpose. We need not understand how to accept the truth of the seed's goal. It is enough that the seed fulfill its purpose.

The farmer need not understand how a seed germinates and becomes a plant bearing its fruit. Some knowledge of the process may help him with his care for the plant. He can isolate it from adverse conditions. The seed, however, knows what to do on its own. God designed it that way. The farmer may be able to help it on its way, but what really matters is the seed fulfilling its God-given purpose. It makes its journey from seed to plant bearing seed, whether or not we understand the process.

Jesus spoke in parables to the crowds about the reign of God. They did not understand all his words, nor did the disciples. The disciples had often to ask him afterwards to explain the stories about God's reign. The crowds were given a taste in word pictures, but they would have to dig to go beyond the surface of the stories. The kingdom processes are often hidden. They are undercurrents of God's grace working outside the visible realm.

In our modern or post-modern world, we like to see and measure results in a scientific construct. We would not be happy with a description of creation as noted in Genesis. It gives us no details, numbers, or specifics. It lacks process details. It lacks complexity. Classification of stars, planets, comets, and diverse speciation is brushed past with little thought to precision. God simply announces his will and it comes to pass. There is no concern for how God's will is fulfilled. There is no mention of laws set in motion to govern the universe and relationships among species, habitats, and celestial bodies. God speaks. God's will is fulfilled. That is what we need know of process.

This is not science. This is faith. This is not historical precision. It is theology. This is not a precise mapping of the complexities of processes and the inner workings of physics, chemistry, and genetics. It is a glimpse into the character of the Creator in whom we are called to trust. It is just enough information. It is the important part of the equation. God created. It is good. Creation was designed to sustain life. God has already made it fertile and self-sustaining. Yes, and we were given the task of caring for what God has created.

So it is with faith and the reign of Christ. We want so desperately to measure and quantify—to scientifically define the processes by which faith is nurtured, extended, and passed on to another generation. We have learned to point out certain markers of spiritual health and vitality. The real work of faith, however, is not visible in the external markers we so often seek. It is simply apparent in the fruit of one's life, where we find the results of processes hidden from view.

It is not the programs of an institution which grow faith in their participants. It is the interaction of disciples who instill faith and devotion by practice and example. It is not church attendance that causes growth in Christ. It is the simple act of trusting God and seeking God's will for our lives. It is not the trappings of our faith that grow believers. It is when believers assume their responsibility before God that faith grows on the inside, in the invisible regions of their lives.

Jesus spoke in parables. There is indication that he had a reason for that. Knowledge of God's reign comes with a price—the price of responsibility. Jesus did not want the crowds to understand all of God's doings. He required that they seek God. He required that they invest effort into relating to God and grappling with the concerns of faith. The mustard seed must wrestle with soil, rock, wind, rain, and sunlight. It must fulfill its purpose facing a degree of adversity with effort. Only then can it be strong and healthy.

Growth occurs from the inside—it is internal. It works in the hidden reaches of our lives. Faith is one of the unquantifiable aspects of life. It can't be measured, weighed, and rushed off to the lab. Faith does, however, produce results that can be seen. Faith fulfills a purpose. It bears fruit. It changes the way we relate to one another. It calls others to join us in the life of peace and with God amid the storms of life. It impacts the lives of others in challenge to seek God and God's will above all else.

Are we ready to follow the example of Jesus' disciples in seeking out the inner purposes of faith? Such a life does not grant us all the answers we might desire. It calls us to trust, to seek, and to give our lives over to assuming responsibility for fulfilling God's will as servants of the Almighty. The sun will return. The seasons will continue to change. The real variable is how we will respond to the purposes of faith set before us. Will we allow its mission to be revealed in lives of fruitfulness?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*