

Getting Faith From Your Head to Your Heart

Again and again I have been asked: *How do I get my faith from my head to my heart?* The great Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky, may not answer in so many words, but his experience points us in the right direction.

Dostoevsky is an “ideological novelist.” That is, ideas dominate and drive his characters.

Their ideas become part of their personalities, to such an extent, indeed, that neither exists independently of the other. His unrivaled genius as an ideological novelist was his capacity to invent actions and situations in which ideas dominate behavior without the latter becoming allegorical. ... His greatest works, after all, had been efforts to undermine the ideological foundations out of which [the Bolshevik] revolution had sprung (Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky*, xiv).

For Dostoevsky, ideas—even ordinary ones—were not only the raw materials from which to create great characters, but also the fuel for kindling his own passions.

One of his closest associates, Nikolai Strakhov, wrote, “The most routine abstract thought very often struck him with an uncommon force and would stir him up remarkably. ... A simple idea, sometimes very familiar and commonplace, would suddenly set him aflame and reveal itself to him in all its significance. He, so to speak, *felt thought* with unusual liveliness (Ibid., xv, emphasis added).

Frank comments, “It is this inborn tendency of Dostoevsky to “feel thought” that gives his best work its special stamp.”

Felt Thought

Something like this is what people are longing for when they ask, "*How can I get my faith from my head to my heart?*" How can I move from ideas to affections—from thought to feeling? How can I experience 'felt thought'?

Surely this is a good longing. Jesus meant for truth in the head to waken passion in the heart: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). Free from sin. Free from what Paul calls "deceitful lusts" (Eph. 4:22) into a new world of holy passions.

The apostle Paul demanded the same thing: "felt truth." "They did not welcome the love of the truth so as to be saved" (2 Thess. 2:10, ESV). Not just: *They did not welcome the truth*; but more: They did not welcome the *love* of the truth. The truth was not felt as beautiful and precious.

Similarly, the apostle Peter believed that when true thoughts replaced ignorance, passions would change. "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the *passions of your former ignorance*" (1 Peter 1:14). Defective ideas produce defective emotions. And true ideas produce true emotions. That is why Peter spells out astonishing truths in 1 Peter 1:3–5, and then says, "In *this* you rejoice!" (1 Peter 1:6).

Feeling Is the Fruit of Affliction

But biblical ideas had not always stirred holy passions in Dostoevsky. In the 1840s, he read the Bible through utopian Socialist glasses. Frank said that his ideas "can be considered to have been inspired by Christianity, though recasting its ethos in terms of modern social problems."

Something changed the way Dostoevsky felt thought. He was arrested for his political views, exposed to a mock execution, and then sentenced to hard labor in Siberia.

As a result, Dostoevsky's previously "secular" Christianity underwent a crucial metamorphosis. Hitherto it had been

dedicated to the improvement of life on earth; now this aim, without being abandoned, became overshadowed by an awareness of the importance of the hope of eternity as a mainstay of moral existence.

Dostoevsky said that the four years he spent in the prison camp were responsible for “the regeneration of [his] convictions.” Now his “felt thought” was different. Now the ideas were different. The truth was different. And the *feeling* of these thoughts was different.

This is the answer Dostoevsky’s experience points to. The “felt thought” that we all long for—rooted in true thoughts, and afire with real feeling—came as a fruit of affliction. The suffering of Siberia forged true “felt thought.”

You Can’t Do Siberia

This is not the answer most of us want to hear when we ask, *How can I get my faith from my head to my heart?* We can’t sign up for a course in Siberia. We can’t read Siberia. We can’t memorize Siberia. We can’t ask someone to hold us accountable for Siberia. Siberia is not ours to do.

It is God’s to do.

And we can prepare. There are true thoughts and false thoughts about how Siberia comes from God. Why it comes. How we are to respond. We can be about getting those thoughts sorted out from the Bible. And we can pray.

Then, when God’s time comes for our Siberia, we will be ready. And God will drive our faith, like a stake, from our head to our heart. And we will never be the same again.

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