

Faith

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12 July 2009

Definition of Faith: Given by Greek scholars: “a firm persuasion, a conviction based upon hearing,” “a conviction of the truth of anything,” “a belief.”

In the Old Testament it refers to a “prospective trust” in what God was going to do. The writer of Hebrews in Chapter 11 summarizes a number of people who did something God wanted them to do – they weren’t sure where God was going – but they did this because of their faith that God knew what he was doing. Abel offers to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain. Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, built the ark because he was warned by God that he needed to do this to save his household. Abraham went out to a place to receive an inheritance, not knowing where he was going, and by faith offers up his son Isaac. By faith Moses, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, he moves his people into the desert to hopefully find the promised land sometime or other – all these and others because of their faith, their trust in God.

So Faith can be defined as “to believe.” For example, in John we read that “whoever believes in Him shall not perish” and “everyone who believes in me shall never die,” or in Acts we read “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved” and in 1 John, “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.”

So Faith can mean “belief” as a noun, and we know there are 232 references in the New Testament to Faith as a noun. Faith is used primarily in 2 ways: **subjectively** – that is the faith we have – the faith we have in God or the faith we have in Jesus Christ. There are many references to people of little Faith, or to those with the faith of a mustard seed, or to those with great Faith. Jesus heals the sick by telling them that their Faith has made them well, as when he healed the paralytic, the sick, the blind, and the woman who was bleeding for many years. Because he saw their faith, he forgives them their sins. He performs his miracles by simply informing them that they are cured because of the faith they had in God. Jesus tells them that because of their faith, that is their faith in God, they are healed. They had to hear it from someone they trusted to believe they had the faith within themselves and needed to become aware of that.

But in Romans – Paul speaks of the **righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe**. Paul says that faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. In Corinthians, he states that if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and our faith is in vain. In another place, he says that without belief, our faith is futile and we are still living in our sins. In Galatians he states that we are not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have belief in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. In other words, before God gave us faith, we were held captive under the law. But in Christ Jesus we are all sons of God, through faith. And so we are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith as well as many others, the so-called great cloud of witnesses.

Furthermore, in James – we read that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone, and faith apart from works is dead.

Now the great definition of faith appears in Hebrews 11:1 – Faith is defined as the “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” etc.

It is “the conviction that God exists and is the creator and ruler of all things, the provider and bestower of eternal salvation through Christ.” In Hebrews 11:6 – “And without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” Or it can be our faith in Christ – “the conviction that Jesus is the Messiah, through whom we obtain eternal salvation in the kingdom of God” or as it is written in Galatians – “we know that a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law.”

Faith can also be used objectively – that is when we talk about the object of our faith – “the substance of Christian faith or what is believed by Christians” as seen in the Book of Jude where it talks about the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.

But today, let’s focus on faith subjectively – the faith that we have. As stated in Hebrews, faith is the “assurance of things hoped for,” or as in another version has it, “being sure of what we hope for.” As with Abraham, faith is being confident that God will give us what is promised, and for which we hope. Faith is the “conviction of things not seen” or another version has it “certain of what we do not see.” It is the trust or confidence in things (that is things promised) unseen by the human eye.

Faith is not blind faith – trusting for no good reason. Some people feel that faith is believing in something without any evidence. As in “You just have to have faith” rather than providing any reasons for such faith. Actually there is much evidence for faith, or many reasons for having faith. The Bible is filled with many references to people who had faith, not just Jesus. King David and the many prophets were people of faith. And throughout history there have been many people who have had faith. Each one of us knows of those in our families and in our communities, who have or had great faith. So if there is much evidence for faith, is there any demand for faith? Yes! Faith is the foundation for a relationship with God. We have the miracles of Jesus performed to give evidence of what faith can do. God takes no pleasure in those of us who lack faith. It is the underlying element in our salvation and service to God. It is the key that unlocks the way to salvation and service. John writes “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.”

Faith is the catalyst for power from God. People who have faith have more power than those who do not believe. Paul talks in Ephesians about the eyes of our hearts being enlightened, that we may know what is the hope to which we are called, and the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places. And in First John “for whatever is born of God, faith helps us to overcome the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world - our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

So, to grow in our relationship with God, we need faith to give us the power.

How do we grow in our faith and maintain our faith? We recall that faith is not blind faith. We’ve already mentioned that there are many cases of people having had the power to be healed through their faith. We read of these stories in the Bible. We read and hear of similar stories of people in history who have been healed through their faith. We maintain our faith through Paul’s threefold directive, mentioned in 1 Timothy – fleeing from materialism, pursuing faith, and fighting the good fight: Paul writes that “those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful

desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs. But as for you, man of God, shun all this; aim at righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith, take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.”

How do we display our faith? The gospel of Christ requires obedience. Jesus is the author of eternal salvation to those who obey him. The gospel writers and Paul preach that we need to become obedient. We are commanded to believe in Jesus, to repent of our sins and to confess Jesus.

Bonhoeffer stated that “Only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.” God calls us to embrace His words and His ways. This is the first call to obedience. It also remains the last call, for the Christian life is nothing more or less than a continual response to God’s Word and Spirit in faith and obedience. Faith is not simply accepting that the things God has revealed to be true, but it involves the challenge that we order the whole of our lives accordingly. Walking this journey will always involve risks and requires the grace of God. We receive new life in Jesus Christ. But that life does not leave us where we are. William Sloan Coffin once affirmed that God accepts us for who we are but does not want to leave us there. Faith is not simply an additive. The life that Christ brings us is transforming. It moves us from where we are to where we ought to be. It calls us to leave our own way. It calls us to walk in the way of Christ. And walking this road is as much a joyful adventure as it is a fulfilling experience. We would like our faith in Christ to put an end to our struggles about meaning and life direction, and to problems with our sin and wrongdoing. But faith does no such thing. Faith ends nothing except our alienation from God. These struggles continue and often intensify. Sin and wrongdoing become much more sensitive and complex issues. Even the issue of meaning remains difficult as we seek to make our faith in Christ relevant in a flawed world and as the matter of one’s life direction becomes all the more pressing. We know that faith is often fragile. At such times we can be sorely tested. But it is not faith that saves us; only God’s love in Christ Jesus gives us power to live a new life. Our faith will always be shaky and incomplete. It will always be unworthy. But faith’s gaze is not to be on itself, but on Him to whom it looks for grace, forgiveness, and empowerment. Thus our faith, no matter how fragile, looks to God’s keeping power rather than to its own ability to remain faithful. Faith cannot depend on faith, because the source of faith lies outside of itself. In other words, the exercise of faith cannot depend on our ability to keep on believing, because this would mean that the harder one tries, the more faith one will have – and we know this does not work. Faith is always our response to the love and faithfulness of God. Thus faith is a gift, because it does not so much lie in us, but is evoked when God’s grace and love touches our lives. Even for faith’s continuance, we need to trust the faithfulness of God.

PRAYER

Eternal and faithful God, who has created the heavens and the earth, giving breath to every living thing, we thank you for all the gifts of creation and for the gift of life itself. We thank you for making us in your own image, for forgiving us when we act as though you have no claim on us, and for keeping us in your steadfast care. We rejoice in Jesus Christ, the only one eternally begotten by you, who was born of your servant Mary and shared the joys and sorrows of life as we know it. We remember Christ’s death, we celebrate Christ’s resurrection, and in the beloved community of your church, we await Christ’s return at the end of history. We take courage from the abiding presence of your Holy Spirit in our midst. We offer you our praise for men and women of faith in every age who stand as witnesses to your love and justice. With all the prophets, martyrs, and saints, and the company of heaven, we glorify you. Amen