

What Is Faith?

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Have you ever wondered about faith, doubted that you had it, or wished you had more? Few things are more misunderstood than faith. Yet, few things are more important.

Did you know that without faith it is impossible to please God? Try as you might, work as hard as you will, you will not and cannot please God without faith. You don't have to take my word for it. It's right in the Bible, in Hebrews 11 and verse 6: "But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him."

Well, if faith is so important, how do we get it? Even more basic, what is faith, anyway? I want to look at what faith is, explain how you can get it, and I'm even going to show you how you can please God and be saved.

A small boy riding a bus home from Sunday school was very proud of the card he had received. It had a picture and a caption that read, "Have Faith in God." Then to his dismay the card slipped from his hand and fluttered out the window. "Stop the bus!" he cried. "I've lost my 'faith in God!'" The driver pulled the bus to a stop, and, as the lad climbed out and went to retrieve his card, one of the adult riders smiled and made a comment about the innocence of youth. A more perceptive adult observed, "All of us would be better off if we were that concerned about our faith."

And so we should be, because, as we just read, without faith it is impossible to please God. So, let's begin by finding out what this thing called faith is.

What is faith?

The eleventh chapter of Hebrews is often called the faith chapter of the Bible because it centers on faith. In verse one, it begins by telling us, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." So this is exactly what we need—a definition of faith.

But a definition doesn't do us any good if we can't understand it. So let's look at this definition closely. To begin, what does "the substance

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of things hoped for" mean? What can the word "substance" mean in this definition?

The original Greek word translated as substance in some Bible versions, such as the King James Version of the Bible, is *hupostasis*. Now, I'm sure you know that words can sometimes have several meanings, and that sometimes these meanings are connected to each other. They sometimes even evolve from one another. *Hupostasis* is like that. It has several meanings, all of which come from its basic meaning of "a setting or placing under," like a substructure or foundation. From that, *hupostasis* is sometimes used to mean the real thing, as opposed to only the image or shadow of the thing. From that meaning, *hupostasis* came to mean, "a steadfastness of mind," "confidence," or "assurance."

Now, although the King James Version of the Bible is an excellent version of the Bible, I believe that here in Hebrews 11, verse 1, it would be better to translate *hupostasis*, not as "substance," but as "assurance." I think you'll immediately see why I say that when you read the first part of the verse with *hupostasis* translated "assurance." "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for."

Assurance makes us sure of something. When we say that we hope for something, we are saying that we would like it to be so. But we are not saying that we are sure it will be so. But when we have assurance, we are sure. So faith is what makes us sure of what we hope for.

Now let's look at the last part of the verse. It says that faith is "the evidence of things not seen." Again, it will be helpful to look at the Greek word translated "evidence." The Greek word translated here as "evidence" is *elegchos*. Actually, "evidence" is a good translation of it, but it can also be translated "proof." So, we can say that faith is the evidence or proof of things not seen.

Let's put it together then. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence [or proof] of things not seen." In other words, faith makes us sure of the things we hope for, and that assurance is itself proof of these things.

Suppose I go to a car dealer and buy a car. It's exactly what I want, but something needs to be done to it, so I can't drive it home that day. I have to wait a couple of days. But I have a bill of sale. I have a proof that I bought the car and it's mine. If anyone asks me whether I really bought the car, I can pull out that paper and show him and say,

"See, I own that car." That paper assures me that I own the car; it assures me that in a couple of days, what I hope for will be real. I'll be able to drive my car home. It is proof that, even though I can't see the car, I own it. That's what faith is. It makes me sure of what I hope for, and it is proof that what I hope for is mine. I want to emphasize that it "*is* mine"—not just "*maybe* mine" or "*as good as* mine" but "*is* mine." So, to make it even simpler, what is faith? Faith is translated from the Greek word *pistis*. It simply means "belief" or "confident belief" or "assured belief."

What Are the Things Hoped For?

Now, I said we were going to look at how we get faith. And that's very important. But first, it's also important that we go back to Hebrews 11:1 and see what are these things "hoped for"? What are these "things not seen"? Hebrews 11 gives us several examples of the types of things that are believed by faith. Verse 3 tells us, "Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear." In other words, we adhere to the Creation account of the Bible by faith. It is not the evidence of fossils, or the evidence in the rocks, or the evidence detected by telescopes that causes us to believe the Creation account. It is faith.

In the verses that follow, we see that it was by faith that Abel offered a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by faith Enoch was translated or taken up so that he did not see death, by faith Noah prepared the ark, by faith Abraham traveled to the promised land and "looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God," by faith Sarah was able to give birth to a child when she was past the age of child bearing, by faith Abraham offered up Isaac, by faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, by faith Joseph told of how the children of Israel would leave Egypt, by faith Moses' parents weren't afraid of the king's command and hid him three months, by faith Moses chose to associate himself with the children of God rather than keep the luxury he would have had as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, by faith Moses left Egypt not fearing the anger of the king, by faith he kept the Passover with its sprinkling of blood, by faith the Israelites passed through the Red Sea, by faith the walls of Jericho fell, by faith Rahab did not perish with the unbelievers.

Many more examples are alluded to, but let's look at verse 13: "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen

them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth." They all believed something they did not yet have and died in faith without having received it.

Verses 39 and 40 tell us something similar but give us a little more information: "And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect." What's this? After mentioning all of these famous people, these pillars of faith who did mighty works, WE are mentioned. Yes, WE are. You and I. These great men and women of faith all died without having received what they had faith in because God was waiting for us. They will yet receive it, but God was waiting for us to be born and to have faith.

The Gift of Faith

But what are we to have faith in and how are we to get it? Let's begin to answer that by moving right on into Hebrews 12. Verse 1 essentially says that since we have this great cloud of witnesses or martyrs, the example of these great people of faith, let us go on and look to Jesus, who is the "author and finisher of our faith." Jesus is the cause and the completer of our faith. In other words, He has done everything necessary for our faith.

Do I mean that there is nothing we have to do to work up faith? Nothing at all we must do to work up faith? Yes, I do. The idea you often hear of working up faith is totally foreign to the Bible. Instead, the Bible says that faith is a free gift. Let me repeat that. The Bible says that faith is a free gift.

If you have your Bible in front of you, turn to Ephesians 2 and we will begin with verse 8: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." Notice it: we are saved by grace. Grace by definition is free. But the apostle goes on to say that it is by grace through faith. And, he says, that that faith is not of ourselves. It is not something we work up. It is not something we have to do anything to get. It is the gift of God. How do we get faith? God gives it to us.

Faith is a gift. And what is faith? It is assured belief. Belief in what? Well, if we are talking about saving faith, it is belief in what saves us. What saves us? The answer to this is found throughout the New

Testament, but let's look at Acts 16. Paul and his companions were in prison. While they were singing hymns, God caused an earthquake and the prison doors opened up. The prison keeper woke up, thought the prisoners must have escaped, and was going to kill himself when Paul stopped him. In verse 31, we read that, trembling, he fell down and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house." Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. But what does believing on Jesus mean?

Jesus, the Object of Saving Faith

In Romans 10:9, Paul says, "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved." So, we must believe that God raised him from the dead. Is there anything more?

Notice Romans 1:16: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." The Gospel of Christ is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes it. So, we need to know what this Gospel of Jesus Christ is. Probably it is something to do with Jesus being raised from the dead, but maybe it contains more information than that. Let's see.

In 1 Corinthians 15, beginning in verse 1, Paul gives us a very neat summary of the Gospel. Let's read it.

Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures: And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time.

So there is what we are to have faith in. We are to believe that Jesus died for our sins—and I want to add here that to believe that Jesus died for our sins, we must believe that we are sinners; hopeless sinners who can do nothing to save ourselves. So, we must believe that Jesus died to save us from our sins, was buried, and rose again. If we believe this, then God has given us the gift of faith and we are saved.

It is really that simple. As John the Baptist said in John 3:36, "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him."

Jesus Christ says the same thing Himself in John 3 beginning in verse 14: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up"—meaning lifted up on the cross in the Crucifixion—"That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:14-18).

Why, then, does the Bible say that without faith, we cannot please God? Simply because without faith we cannot believe the Gospel. We cannot believe that Jesus Christ died on that cross for our sins. And if we cannot believe that, then our sins are still upon us, and sin separates us from God, and we remain condemned.

That's why faith is so important. It is the instrument by which we receive our salvation. Without it, we cannot please God and we cannot be saved. Now, I am sure there are some of you who want to believe, but who think you don't believe. You think you don't have enough faith. What can you do? Are you worried that you don't have enough faith? What can you do? Well, first, don't try to work up your faith out of your own human will. It's not going to work. Remember, faith is a gift from God. Now notice what the father of a demon-possessed boy did. You can find this in Mark 9, and we will pick it up in verse 23.

He brought the boy to Jesus so Jesus could cast out the demon. And Jesus said to him, "Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth. And straightway the father of

the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."

Notice that he had enough faith to bring the boy to Jesus. And he had enough faith to ask for more faith. You can't argue about it, both of those acts are acts of faith. Friend, if you don't think you have faith, but you have been reading up to this point, you probably have more faith than you think. And if you want more, ask for it. Ask God to give you more faith, and He will.

How do I know? Because Jesus says in Matthew 7, verse 7, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." Yes, "For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened" (Matthew 7:8). As Jesus says a few verses later, "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?" Ask, and your Father in heaven will give it to you.

And if you believe that you are a sinner with no hope of doing anything to save yourself, then remember that Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for your sins. There is nothing you can add to the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Only believe and you will be saved. And even that belief is a free gift of God.

So, what is faith? It is belief. And what are we to believe in? We are to believe that we are sinners, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that He died to fully pay the penalty for our sins. And how are we to get faith? God gives it to us freely. Has God given you the faith to believe that Jesus died to pay for your sins? If so, you have the faith to please God, and Jesus has died to save you. If you are not sure, remember, you can ask, "I believe, Lord; help my unbelief."

Name It and Claim It?

Before ending, I want to mention a common misconception of faith. There are those who teach that, if only you believe, if you have enough faith, then you can have whatever you want. Jesus might seem to support the teaching by what He said in Mark 9:23 to the father the demonized boy, "If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth." And James writes in James 1:6, "But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed." But does this mean

that if I believe that tomorrow afternoon I will travel faster than the speed of light and arrive on a planet in a distant galaxy, that, because I believe it, it will happen? No. When we take it to such an absurd extreme, we see that there is a flaw in this idea of faith.

If we look at the context of the Scripture in James, we see that he was saying that if we lack wisdom, we should ask without doubting, and God will give it to us. This is a promise in the Bible. Ask for wisdom, and God will give it to us. We can be sure of this because God has promised it in the Bible. Likewise with salvation. God says that, if we believe that we are sinners in need of a Savior and believe that Jesus alone is our Savior, then we are saved. We can rest assured on that promise. The father of the boy tormented with the demon expressed some doubt about Jesus' ability to cast the demon out. We read this in Mark 9:22, where the man said to Jesus, "But if thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us." He didn't say, Lord, you can. He said, If you are able. That's why Jesus said in verse 23, "If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth." Essentially, Jesus was saying, Of course I am able to do it. Are you are able to believe? That's when the man told Jesus he believed, but He needed Jesus' help with his unbelief. And Jesus helped his unbelief. Jesus successfully cast the unclean spirit out of the boy.

So, what am I getting at? Over against what some preachers in what is called the word-faith movement will try to tell you, I am trying to emphasize this: Faith is a gift. And faith is assured belief. But it is assured belief in something we can have assured belief in; in other words, it is believing the promises of God. It is not believing that God will give you whatever you want. It is believing that God will give you what He promises in the Bible.

The most important of those promises to believe is the promise of eternal salvation if you believe in Jesus Christ alone as your Savior. And the Bible does contain other promises, such as the promise of wisdom if we ask for it and the promise of the Holy Spirit to those who ask, the promise of rest for those who come to Christ, and so on. One of the most over-arching promises in the Bible is this one, found in Romans 8:28: "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." God does not promise you riches in this life; God does not promise you perfect health; God does not promise that your life will be trouble-free. But God does promise that He will work all things out so that they will be for your good, if you are among those who love Him and are called of Him.

We can have faith in the promises that God gives to us Christians in Scripture. And, I will make another point using another Scripture in Matthew 21. Jesus had cursed a fig tree because it was full of green leaves, but had no fruit. After Jesus cursed it, it quickly dried up. He did not do this on a whim. He did it with a purpose. The fig tree was a figure of Israel. Israel appeared to be green and flourishing. It had a thriving religious system. There were many devout people. But, like the fig tree, there was no fruit. There was a lot of show, but there was no substance. There was ritual, but no repentance, no faith, no mercy, no love. And so, Jesus cursed the fig tree, indicating what God was about to do to Israel.

His disciples marveled that the fig tree withered so quickly. So "Jesus answered and said unto them, Verily I say unto you, If ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall not only do this which is done to the fig tree, but also if ye shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; it shall be done. And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive" (verses 21 and 22). Does Jesus mean that we should go around zapping fig trees and mountains? No, of course not. Jesus meant that His disciples, as Bible commentator John Gill explained, "should be able to perform things much more difficult and surprising, whenever the good of the souls of men, the propagation of the Gospel, and the glory of God required them."

And how does this apply to you? Jesus said it in another promise in Matthew 6:33: "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." In other words, God will supply all of our worldly needs—food, clothing, shelter—if we put the furtherance of His kingdom and purposes first. Jesus is saying that we are to shift our priorities away from caring so much for the things and cares of this world to the things of God. If we put our resources into the furtherance of the kingdom of God, such as the preaching of the Gospel, then God will take care of our worldly needs. "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." That's a promise.

Faith Summarized

Here is a good summary of faith written by Ebenezer Erskine in the eighteenth century:

1. Faith is THE GIFT OF GOD. It is not the product of a free will. It is the operation of the Spirit of God by the Word of God and is the parent of all other grace.

2. Faith has CHRIST JESUS as its principal object, for it is faith in Christ Jesus—our Lord, saviour, mediator, and hope. Christ is the bread; faith is the mouth which eats. Christ is the brazen serpent; faith is the eye that looks.

3. Faith is RECEIVING CHRIST, not just hearing about Him or acknowledging Him, but a committal to Him. Is Christ meat? Then eat! Is Christ living water? Then drink! Is Christ the refuge? Then flee to Him! Is Christ Lord? Then worship Him!

4. Faith is to REST UPON CHRIST. "Rest in the Lord" (Psa. 37:7). Faith is not an isolated act based upon an intellectual knowledge of some facts, but is a trusting in and resting upon Christ to perform all that I need.

5. Faith is to REST UPON CHRIST ALONE! The word "ALONE" is important. Most men, by nature, try to add something to the sacrifice and intercession of Christ. God has established a bridge of communication between heaven and earth by the obedience and blood of Christ, and every other passage is blocked by the holiness and justice of God.

6. Faith rests upon Christ AS HE IS PRESENTED IN THE GOSPEL. We ask no other sign than the word of God. Faith is to believe the record that God hath given concerning His Son. "He that hath the Son of God hath life."

7. Faith rests upon Christ FOR SALVATION, SANCTIFICATION, RIGHTEOUSNESS, and FULL REDEMPTION! The goal of faith is the salvation of our souls; and this our Lord undertook in the eternal covenant and which He completed on Calvary when He cried, "IT IS FINISHED!"