

# Faith—What Is It?

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*"For we walk by faith, not by sight."  
—II Corinthians 5:7*

How important is faith?

- » "For whatever is not from faith is sin." (Romans 14:23)
- » "But without faith it is impossible to please Him." (Hebrews 11:6)

As these scriptures show, for a Christian, faith is an absolute requirement.

What is this faith we are required to have? We usually turn to Hebrews 11:1 for a definition of faith, but another verse, Romans 4:3, may provide an even sharper focus: "What does scripture say? 'Abraham took God at his word, and that act of faith was accepted as putting him into a right relationship with God'" (*The New Testament: A Translation* by William Barclay).

Abraham's "act of faith" was to believe the words of God. Simply, *faith is believing what God says*. That belief, that faith, is what pleases God, putting us in a position to have a right relationship with Him. A right relationship, even on a human level, must have trust as its foundation.

Abraham's example also shows us that this belief, this faith, is not just intellectual agreement but rather a deep conviction that motivates our core and changes how we think. The evidence of this change is an action. True belief and faith *must have* action to complete it, or else it is dead and useless faith (James 2:20).

## From the Beginning

Living faith as a requirement began with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Notice Genesis 3:6: "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate."

The first humans failed their test of faith. They trusted what they "saw" rather than believing what God said—His words—and became the first example of man choosing to walk by sight rather than by faith. Humanity has followed this example ever since, proving that Adam and Eve's faithlessness was not an aberration but a trait of every human heart, including ours.

What were the consequences of this sin, this act of faithlessness? The answer is in Genesis 3:24: "So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life."

Adam and Eve's sin of faithlessness destroyed the close relationship they had with God. Because they did not trust Him, their lack of faith put a barrier between themselves and God. The broken trust, faithlessness, ruined that relationship just as it does in our human relationships.

Adam and Eve chose to follow the faithless Satan rather than the faithful God. Satan persuaded them to focus on what they could see rather than what God said. The strategy was so successful that Satan has consistently used it on humanity.

Satan is the prime example of faithlessness. Satan believes God exists, but his is a dead faith because it does not lead to right action. James 2:19-20, from the New Living Translation (NLT), forcefully points out the futility and foolishness of Satan's faith: "Do you still think it's enough just to believe that there is one God? Well, even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror! Fool! When will you ever learn that faith that does not result in good deeds is useless?"

### **The Evidence**

When confronted with the choice to eat or not eat the fruit, what evidence did Adam and Eve have? All they had were the words of God.

Notice the classic definition of faith found in Hebrews 11:1: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." What is the "evidence of things not seen?" God's words. The rest of the chapter with its examples of faith illustrates that the faithful had only His words as evidence.

Verses 36-38 list various trials God has required of some of the faithful. Especially notice verse 39: "And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise." Even though all *looked* lost from a human standpoint, they still believed God, knowing that the sovereign God could and would keep His promises even beyond the grave.

With all of God's promises, He does not promise *when* He will answer. The timing of those answers is in His hands. Based on what is best, God, who is love (I John 4:8, 16), decides when (Ecclesiastes 3:11). The right time may be, not in this life, but in the next. In fact, believing God's promises, even to the end—death—could be the last piece of proof God requires to "know" He can entrust us with eternal life, an everlasting relationship with Him.

Again, notice our example of faith, Abraham, the "Father of the Faithful." As Abraham had the knife raised to sacrifice his son, the only evidence he had was the words of God. Abraham could believe God—take Him at His word—or believe all the evidence he could see that the son of promise would die before God fulfilled His promises. Abraham could not "see" what God was going to do. As far as Abraham was concerned, Isaac was dead. The only "evidence" he had that it all would work out was God's words—the promises God made to him.

God also needed evidence. God did not know for sure what was in Abraham's heart (Genesis 22:12) until Abraham made the decision to trust God rather than all the physical evidence around him. The patriarch's actions proved he would walk by faith and not by sight.

To walk is an action. So even the phrase "walk by faith" demonstrates that living faith requires action. Our evidence is God's words. God's evidence is our actions.

We are in the same boat as Abraham. So says Galatians 3:6: "You have exactly the same experience as Abraham. Abraham took God at his word, and that act of faith was accepted as putting him into a right relationship with God" (William Barclay). Just as Abraham had to choose between believing God and believing the circumstances he could see, God also has to put us into exactly the same position. He must find out what is the true intent of our hearts—the depth of our faith. God needs to "know" that we will trust Him, no matter what, before He commits to a permanent, eternal relationship with us.

### **Faith's Source**

Where do we get this faith? Ephesians 2:8 answers: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God." We cannot work it up—that would be our effort (Isaiah 64:6).

Consider when God first started working with us. One year we were clueless, the next year things were making sense. We read the Bible and understood it, but more importantly, we believed it.

Where did that belief come from? It was, as Ephesians 2:8 says, a gift from God. The real miracle is not that we understood, but rather that we now *believed* those words we understood. And this happened only because God made it possible.

What was the evidence that we believed those words? We began living by them. Our new works and actions were the evidence of our faith: keeping the Sabbath, tithing, eating habits, etc.

Just like Abraham, our actions showed our desire to begin a right relationship with God motivated by His gift of faith. "Don't you remember that our ancestor Abraham was declared right with God because of what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see, he was trusting God so much that he was willing to do whatever God told him to do. His faith was made complete by what he did—by his actions" (James 2:21-22 NLT).

To complete our faith, are we willing to believe and do whatever God tells us? Consider those first experiences as we began to believe. We faced family pressure, work pressure, peer pressure, etc., to obey what we now believed. What evidence did we have to back up our actions? All we had was God's words. Armed with only those words, we willingly faced any opposition to act on what God commands. Just like Abraham, it was our faith in those words that encouraged us to obey and begin our journey, not knowing where we were going (Hebrews 11:8).

At our baptism, could we have predicted all the twists and turns our lives have taken since? Just like Israel's journey after baptism in the Red Sea, God has taken us in a zigzag route across this wilderness we call life. What was our evidence of things not seen? Only the words of God. That was the only evidence we had then, and it is the only sure evidence we have now.

As we deal with our trials, do we remember that first love? Do we remember the challenges we were willing to confront with only the words of God as our evidence? It is no different today. Will we believe God or what we can see? God needs to find out just as He did with Abraham—to "know" we will obey, no matter what, until the end (Matthew 10:22).

To test our faith, God's pattern is to bring us to a point—a brick wall or a Red Sea—that seemingly allows no escape. That is where He can find out what is truly in our hearts—hearts of belief or evil unbelief (Hebrews 3:12). Will we believe Him or our eyes?

Paul had this experience and recorded it for us in II Corinthians 1:8-10:

We should like you, our brothers, to know something of the trouble we went through in Asia. At that time we were completely overwhelmed, the burden was more than we could bear, in fact we told ourselves that this was the end. Yet we believe now that we had this sense of impending disaster that we might learn to trust, not in ourselves, but in God who can raise the dead. It was God who preserved us from such deadly perils, and it is he who still preserves us. (Phillips translation)

Even though all human hope was lost, God came to the rescue to teach Paul—and us through Paul—that God can be trusted. "I am God! I can be trusted. . . . I alone am the God who can be trusted" [Isaiah 65:16 Contemporary English Version (CEV)].

### **Promises**

It is unwise for us to use such words as "never" and "always." We humans just do not have the power to fulfill what these absolutes imply. The actor Sean Connery found this out when he once said he would never play James Bond again. Some years later, he did just that, and the movie was called "Never Say Never Again" as a reminder of his brash statement.

The sovereign God is under no such restrictions in His power. Notice some of the absolute words of God, words that are promises we can trust:

**Ecclesiastes 3:11** (CEV): "God makes everything happen at the right time." Not some things, not most things, but everything.

**Psalms 84:11**: "No good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly." No good thing means absolutely none, not even one. It is good to remember that carnal man has a very nearsighted definition of good (Isaiah 55:8).

**Psalms 34:19**: "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all." Not some, not most—but *all*!

**Philippians 4:19**: "And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus." He promises to supply, not all our wants, but all our needs. People often confuse wants and needs.

**Romans 8:28**: "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." Do we know and believe that all things work together for our good? Again, it means exactly what it says—not some things or most things, but *all* things.

Herbert W. Armstrong wrote about an incident in his early ministry that illustrates this promise in Romans. A flood in the area put all the farms under water. One of the farmers, a member of the

church, while looking at his flooded farm, said he did not see how this could be good. However, because God said all things work together for good to those called, he chose to trust and believe God. When the water subsided, most of his crops survived while the water destroyed most of his neighbors' crops. When it came time to harvest and sell his crops, he received top dollar because the flood had created such a severe shortage.

The farmer walked by faith, not sight. Rather than give in to worry and fear, he instead *chose* to trust God and wait patiently on Him to keep His promise.

Notice another example of faith—one that Christ calls the greatest example of faith He had seen during His ministry—that of the centurion and his sick servant found in Matthew 8. What makes this such an outstanding example of faith? It starts with the centurion recognizing Christ's authority. Once that is established, the words of Christ are sufficient; nothing more is necessary. Are the words of the sovereign God sufficient for us?

As we contend with trials that seem to have no way out, are we going to trust every word of God (Matthew 4:4)—His promises, even the absolutes—or are we going to believe what we see? Will we walk by faith or sight?

Will we have faith in God's promises and love for us, even if there is no deliverance in this life? The faith chapter, Hebrews 11, shows that this may be required (Hebrews 11:36-39). So does Revelation 12:11: "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death."

The only evidence we have in these circumstances is God's words. Will we trust them? We did when first called. Will we do it to the end? Will we ask God to stir up His gift of faith? He promises to supply what we need (Philippians 4:19), especially if we ask (Matthew 21:22).

So faith is simply believing and acting on what God says without watering it down—even the absolutes—no matter what the circumstances are, no matter what the physical evidence looks like, no matter what price we may have to pay. This applies not only to the big trials of life, but even more so to the little decisions we make each day (Luke 16:10). Human nature chooses to rely more on carnal reasoning and human tradition and examples rather than on God's words. What governs our daily actions? We can prove to be faithless by discounting the words of God, compromising, and making them of no effect (Mark 7:13).

## **A Test**

God, through Paul, commands us to examine our faith and to test ourselves (II Corinthians 13:5). How can we know the strength of our faith—our belief in the words of God? All we have to do is examine our fears and worries.

Nehemiah writes, "For this reason he was hired, that I should be afraid and act that way and sin, so that they might have cause for an evil report, that they might reproach me" (Nehemiah 6:13). Why did Nehemiah call being afraid a sin? Because fear and worry call God a liar, insinuating that His words about His sovereignty, love, power, and faithfulness are not to be trusted. Fear and worry mirror the attitudes of a faithless Satan who believes God exists but does not believe what He says.

Philippians 4:6 tells us, "Be anxious for nothing." In other words, we are commanded, "Don't worry about anything," another of God's absolutes. To have fear, worry, anxiety, or forebodings question God's goodness and care. They display a lack of faith in His promises of wise and gracious providence and cast doubts on the depth of the love God and Christ have for us. If we cannot trust God, how can He ever trust us? Why would Christ marry forever someone who doubts His love?

Rather than give in to fear and worry, we can choose—an action—to believe God and His love. If we believe in the depth of the love God (John 17:23) and Christ (John 15:13) have for us, believing those words, faith in that perfect love will cast out fear (I John 4:18) so that we can say as David did: "I will fear no evil; for You are with me" (Psalm 23:4).

In Psalm 78:22 (NLT), David succinctly cuts to the heart of Israel's problem, and by extension, ours: ". . . for they did not believe God or trust him to care for them." Doubting God's love for us is at the core of the sin of faithlessness. This doubt was a major characteristic of our ancestors, ancient Israel. ". . . because the people of Israel argued with Moses and tested the Lord by saying, 'Is the Lord going to take care of us or not?'" [Exodus 17:7 (NLT)] They never overcame this sin of faithlessness. We must. The stakes are so much higher.

It is sobering to consider the fate of the fearful and unbelieving and the rank they are given in the list found in Revelation 21:8: "But the cowardly [*fearful*, KJV], unbelieving [*faithless*, RSV], abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

God tested the faith of Adam and Eve and of Abraham. The former failed, the latter succeeded. Eventually, God will put every human being to the same test.

As we cope with these tests we need to stir up (II Timothy 1:6) and exercise that gift of faith God gave us at the beginning, to get back to that first love and dedication to the words and promises God has given us.

We have the same choice as Adam and Eve, ancient Israel, and Abraham had. It is our decision to make: to believe God or to believe what we see—the visible circumstances we face. Faith is life (Habakkuk 2:4), and faithlessness is sin (Romans 14:23) and therefore death (Romans 6:23). God entreats us to choose life (Deuteronomy 30:19).