

The Life of Faith

The Christian life (as distinct from the external trappings of denominationalism and public Christian culture) is based on “faith”. That alone does not make us different. Many religions, cults and self-help groups are predicated on concepts of faith. So, what makes Christian faith unique? Is it enough to “have faith”, an amorphous concept if ever there were one, or is something more implied? If we are to stand out in a world that is searching for faith that has both meaning and substance (an oxymoron to most people), it is important that we grasp what the Bible teaches and how to put it into practice in main street life.

We all have faith

The concept of faith is universal. The term is used to describe religious beliefs and systems (the Christian faith, the Jewish faith, the Muslim faith, faith healers and so on). Professing atheists exercise faith all the time. More broadly, the word is employed to convey a sense of “trust”. Someone might say that he or she has “faith” they will recover from a serious illness. Or “faith” the stock market will improve. This kind of faith is akin to wishful thinking, not faith in God or gods. Some people even call their daughters “Faith”.

Everyone has faith and uses it. When I put the car key into the ignition and turn it, I have subliminal faith the engine will start. When I take my seat on board an aircraft I have faith those who are in the cockpit and control towers know what they are doing, where they are going, that the engines are in a high state of maintenance and that we will safely return to earth, in the right place, when it is time to do so. When I hand over my money at a bank, I have faith the teller is not going to put it into his or her pocket and that the company is going to look after it and offer a competitive rate of interest.

We take faith into all our interpersonal relationships, trusting that people with whom we make emotional commitments will not betray us, that our partners will come back home at the end of the day, that family members will not abandon us for someone else and that friends are not about to cheat on us. It takes faith to make a hotel reservation, to hop on a bus on the strength of a destination sign at the front window, to sit on a chair and not be worried about its capacity to hold our weight, or to sign a contract worth a lot of money. Every day we exercise faith. We just don’t tend to think about it like that.

Faith can be manipulated by charlatans and false religious teachers. It can be taken advantage of by organizers of deceptive financial schemes, unethical salesmen and business competitors. We have all heard of “pyramid” schemes where gullible people send money to organizers, hoping their recruits will send them cash in turn. Parties in relationships often take advantage of the trust reposed in them and commit adultery, betray business interests or gossip to third persons. When this happens, the injured party finds it harder to trust other people again, to have “faith” in them.

What does the Bible teach?

The Bible has a lot to say about faith. The word is used more than five hundred times in the New Testament. The Bible says that God has given every man and woman a “measure of faith” (Romans 12:3). The capacity to use faith is a faculty that only humans have. The early church became known as a community of faith (Galatians 6:10). The entire structure of Christianity is based on the exercise of faith in relation to God and matters of eternal consequence. So what does it mean?

The Greek word the writers of the New Testament used for faith was “*pistis*”. In its simplest forms “*pistis*” means to trust, to rely, rest, repose and have confidence or trust in someone or something. It is stronger than “hope”. Faith is more than a nebulous feeling; it is a conviction, an assurance. It is material.

Faith is the “substance” of something for which we hope; it is evidence we cannot see with our own eyes (Hebrews 11:1). When we have faith we “know” something to be true, regardless of what our intellect is telling us about the logic of such a proposition. True faith is more than “belief”. For example, I “believe” the People’s Republic of China is a communist state, but I am not committed to it. I believe my friend who tells me he is going on a holiday, but I am not committed to that fact in any way. Belief in action equals faith. It is going beyond mental assent or mere verbal agreement. If a policeman tells me a certain road is the only way to my destination, and I accept that what he says is accurate, I make a choice to follow the truth of his statement and commit myself to following his guidance in faith. We “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7).

Faith does not come to us from our parents, our culture or the church. We may learn from others the facts and arguments for Christian belief, and may even see good examples of Christianity in action, but the capacity recognise Christ as Lord make His will and example our “own” is a “gift” from God. Psychologists have opinions about meaning and the exercise of faith, but the gift of faith to people is an act of God, not an identifiable psychological principle. Otherwise, we might feel inclined to boast about our attitudes, abilities and achievements (Ephesians 2:8, 9). We might even be tempted to fashion Christianity according to our ideals, needs and aspirations. It doesn’t work like that. Faith doesn’t involve reducing belief to our level, but reaching out to God.

If this is starting to sound a bit theoretical, it is just another way of describing the every-day scenarios described above. The kind of faith we exercise (and take for granted) in life involves the will, mind and emotions.

Faith: the only way to please God

The Bible says that without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). The “heroes” of the Bible were ordinary men and women but they are known to us today because they lived by faith. For them, trusting God implied following his commands literally in their decision-making and having confidence in His promises and plans in spite of what others people or circumstances indicated.

Unlike some religions, where the will of God is imposed and the characters involved are more like predestined puppets (with predictable self-justification and excuses), the Bible emphasizes obedience based on confidence in God and understanding of His will. Christianity stresses individual freedom of choice (with consequences). David said, "I delight to do your will" (Psalm 40:8). Faith enables us to obey God while having a full assurance that He can be trusted with our lives and welfare. Christianity is established on the foundation of trust in God's plan of salvation through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ to save us, above all else. Faith means relinquishing our efforts to be good enough to please God and resting entirely in Christ to do so on our behalf.

The New Testament book of Hebrews (especially Chapter 11) catalogues the actions and decisions of some Old Testament personalities whose faith in God led them to make lifestyle, career and attitudinal choices that were at odds with what others were expecting. To cite just one example, Abraham was commended for his faith because he obeyed God and left his home and country and set out for a new land trusting only in God's word and guidance. He faced enormous criticism for doing so, from incredulous friends and family members. He held out against every human instinct and trusted God when he promised him a son, in spite of the fact that he was an old man and his wife was infertile. He was prepared to sacrifice all, even the life of his son Isaac, because he took God at his Word. As a result, he entered into a special relationship with God (Romans 4:5, 9) and his human weaknesses and sins were forgiven, as though they were no longer an issue (the Bible calls this "justification").

Step-by-step

So, what does it mean to have faith in God? What if we can't perform the exploits of great men and women in the Bible?

First of all, faith is a way of life: The Bible says that, "The just shall live by faith" (Habakkuk 2:4, Romans 1:17). Faith is not a passing phase or the feeling of a moment. If we truly trust God we will pursue the kind of life that pleases him. The life of faith is, by definition, at odds with a life based on the negative values of doubt, unbelief or indifference. Changing gears and destinations can be hard, but the Holy Spirit provides the power.

Second, faith is voluntary. It is a choice: Jesus told people in his day to, "Have faith in God" (Mark 11:22). My father used to say that the letters in "faith" stood for "Forsaking All I Trust Him". Not a new observation, but new every time we do so. Some people choose not to forsake their ways and values in favour of those of God. Faith is not a matter being coerced, tricked or cornered by God or religious people. It is up to us. Jesus called his generation "faithless" because they were not prepared to do so (Matthew 17:17). Even his disciples felt down at times and needed to be reminded to have a different mindset to that on display around them. "Do not be faithless, but believing" Jesus encouraged Thomas (John 20:27).

Third, faith is a commitment. As a marriage celebrant, whenever I perform a marriage ceremony, I ask the parties to make a commitment to one another, to the exclusion of all others, for life. When I trust God, I commit my life and future to him, even though I can't see around the corner. If he should fail me, I have no other hope for eternity. Humanly speaking, it is hard to take our hands off the levers. Let me explain. I have found the hardest thing about four-wheel driving down a steep slope is putting the car into gear and keeping the foot off the clutch or the brake. That takes real commitment. Letting go and putting the engine in charge goes against everything we feel comfortable doing. It is hard to let go when nervousness about situations we are facing wants to take over our thinking. But it is the only safe course.

Fourth, faith is an attitude. When we confront situations that require answers, we can either focus on our limited human wisdom or we can listen to what God is saying to us by the Holy Spirit. Faith involves believing that God is, that His Word is true and reliable, that He will keep His promises, that He hears us when we pray and that He will reward us.

If all of this is true, we can have peace with God and eternal life without necessarily having a complete intellectual grasp of Biblical theology. Modern man proclaims the supremacy of individual judgment and human reason as criteria of truth. In this respect modern man is wrong. Faith is not blind, but faith in God means we submit our intellect to truths we cannot analyze. We cannot afford to reject eternal truths simply because we do not yet understand them.

Jesus Christ: the goal and object of our faith

Faith healers draw attention to themselves. Faith systems emphasize feelings, perceptions, sets of facts and human wisdom. Christian faith is centred on the person of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 2:5). It is not governed by allegiance to a doctrine, system or creed. Many people mechanically recite church creeds but do not have faith in God. Christianity is not based on ideas ("faith in faith"), but an individual, the conviction that He is true, his work is "enough", and that we do not need to add to what he has already accomplished to get closer to God.

Only faith can save us (Romans 3:28, Ephesians 2:8, 9). Trust in God, rather than ourselves, is the only way to be whole. So, how can we build it? By being open and receptive to what God says to us. Faith is built up by hearing God's Word. (Romans 10:17); this means we need to "get into" the Bible to become stronger. Faith atrophies through disobedience, but is strengthened by maintaining a habit of yielding to and living within God's will.

Faith in God, through Jesus, is able to overcome pressures heaped on us by a hostile non-Christian world (1 John 5:4) and protect us from attack (Ephesians 6:16). Faith enables us to triumph. Faith can move mighty mountains, calm troubled seas and turn deserts into fountains. Linked in our lives to obedience to the call and purpose of God, Biblical faith can provide a strong foundation for relevant, powerful and dynamic discipleship.