

Hebrews 10:32-12:3 • The Meaning of “Faith”

Introduction

“Faith” is a word thrown around by every Christian of every denomination, often without regard for its biblical definition. Like many key words found in the Bible, its usage in the world has been altered so as to subvert its true, biblical meaning. One dictionary entry, for example, is “Belief that does not rest on logical proof or material evidence”. There’s a layer of truth to this definition but it does not entirely embrace the Bible’s definition. It’s important to note that both the Greek and Hebrew words for “faith” can also be translated “faithfulness”. Switching between the two helps a great deal in understanding the biblical examples given to describe faith and the fact that this is supposed to be the defining characteristic visibly evident in the way each Christian lives their life.

³²But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, ³³partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. ³⁴For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one. ³⁵Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ³⁶For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

³⁷FOR YET IN A VERY LITTLE WHILE,
HE WHO IS COMING WILL COME, AND
WILL NOT DELAY.

³⁸BUT MY RIGHTEOUS ONE SHALL LIVE
BY FAITH;
AND IF HE SHRINKS BACK,
MY SOUL HAS NO PLEASURE IN HIM.

³⁹But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.

[Read v.10:32-39]

Q: Historically, what was the “great conflict of sufferings” referred to here?

A: This refers to when believers, at that time almost nearly all Jews still living in Israel, were persecuted and driven from Israel. It describes the first major persecution of the church after Pentecost.

Q: How did they handle this persecution?

A: By either losing their own property in the process of fleeing or by taking on the burden of supporting others who fled and lost their own, they were an example to all those around them.

Q: What kind of example is it here intimated that they were?

A: An example of faith because in spite of the terrible circumstances, they trusted not in the quality of their earthly possessions but “a better possession and a lasting one”. In other words, they held fast to the things of heaven rather than earth. The writer of Hebrews in v.35 goes on to call this both their “confidence” and “great reward”.

Q: So if they have demonstrated that they have faith, is there anything else that they need?

A: According to v.36, all that’s needed to complete the work of faith is “endurance” so that they will be able to complete “the will of God”, seeing it all the way through to the end.

Q: How is this confirmed in the writer’s use of Habakkuk 2:3-4 in v.37-39?

A: The evidence that they’ve been living faithfully has been proven both by the fact that they “are not of those who shrink back” – that is, have fallen away, but are “persevering”.

Point: In spite of the fact that earthly circumstances have generally trended to the contrary, biblical faith is proved by perseverance of such circumstances, holding fast to God’s Word and ways instead.

¹Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²For by it the men of old gained approval.

³By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.

[Read v.11:1-3]

Q: How do we know that biblical faith is not an emotional kind of wishful thinking?

A: According to Scripture it is an inner conviction not based on emotion but on the Word of God.

*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.
Romans 10:17*

Q: What are the two key words used to describe faith?

A: "Assurance" and "conviction". The word for "conviction" could also be translated as "evidence", a further indication that faith is not just an expression of wishful thinking but treating the future as if it were the present and the invisible as if can be seen.

Q: What is a key attribute of biblical faith first expressed in v.1 and 3 which is also revealed in v.7, 13, and 27?

A: When true faith exists in one's heart we can see what others cannot see. Among the examples given, by faith Noah saw coming judgment, Abraham saw a future city, Joseph saw the exodus from Egypt, and Moses saw God.

Q: What is a second key attribute first expressed in v.2 which is also confirmed in v.4-5 and 39?

A: When true faith exists in one's heart God bears witness to that heart by His Spirit. "Men of old gained approval" (v.2) along with Abel, Enoch, and other examples cited.

Q: What is given here as the ultimate example of the relationship between faith and the power of God's Word?

A: Creation itself. God spoke and it was done!

Point: *When we believe what He says, the power of the Word accomplishes things in our lives and provides God's personal approval.*

[Read v.4]

Q: What did Abel demonstrate that he understood which apparently Cain did not?

A: That God required a blood sacrifice.

And according to the Law, one may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

Hebrews 9:22

Point: *There's a greater work of faith required when it comes to salvation in believing in the greater principles and teachings behind the things associated with it. In the Old Testament as well as the work of the cross, it's the greater doctrine of Christ's shedding of His blood for us that is more important to trust in than the sacrifices or cross in and of itself.*

⁴By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks.

⁵By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death; AND HE WAS NOT FOUND BECAUSE GOD TOOK HIM UP; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God. ⁶And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

[Read v.5-6]

Q: What did Enoch demonstrate by the quality of his faith?

A: That it's actually possible to please God. In fact, it's the **only** way to please God.

Q: Why might it be significant that Enoch is commended for faith rather than love?

A: The inference is that love is incomplete when not accompanied by obedience to God's Word and ways.

Point: *Biblical faith trusts God in this life to the point of living for Him exactly as if we're already residing in the next life with Him. Enoch illustrates that the biblically faithful never really die and live not for the limits of this life but the eternal one to come.*

[Read v.7]

⁷By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.

Q: Why were the 120 years it took Noah to build the ark a testimony to everyone around him?

A: No one had seen or anticipated judgment by means of a flood, so a giant ship – along with Noah's personal witness – would have been a testimony of something unseen, something Noah believed by faith.

Q: In Noah's case, one might say that faith led to works. Was Noah saved because of his works?

A: Noah didn't do this to obtain salvation, but as a testimony of faith that he was already saved.

Point: *We do the things of God because of faith, not in order to obtain faith.*

[Read 8-12]

⁸By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; ¹⁰for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. ¹²Therefore there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants AS THE STARS OF HEAVEN IN NUMBER, AND INNUMERABLE AS THE SAND WHICH IS BY THE SEASHORE.

Q: In the first example in v.8, how might we characterize Abraham's faith?

A: Abraham believed God when he did not know "where".

Q: In the second example in v.9-10, how might we characterize Abraham's faith?

A: Abraham believed God when he did not know "how".

Q: And in the third example in v.11-12, what is the example of faith?

A: They believed God when they did not know "when".

Point: *Abraham left the old life, lived as a pilgrim, and followed God wherever He led. God's plans for him came about not according to Abraham's desires but God's purpose and timing, proving the power to fulfill His will to have a child when they were "good as dead" – beyond human hope of success. He did not return to the old life but pressed on towards victory.*

¹³All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. ¹⁵And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.

¹⁷By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; ¹⁸it was he to whom it was said, "IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED." ¹⁹He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.

²⁰By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come.

²¹By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff.

[Read v.13-16]

Q: So what do the examples of Abel, Enoch, Noah and Abraham have in common?

A: They did not view themselves as citizens of earth, but of God's kingdom. Where this life was concerned, they considered themselves to be "strangers and exiles on the earth". (v.13)

Q: What do we have in common with these examples when it comes to a city prepared for them by God?

A: We have the exact, same promise.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband.

Revelation 21:1-2

Application: Do you live now as if you're already a citizen of the New Jerusalem or still bound to this life? Have you considered that your faith can be measured by the degree to which you embrace this life rather than the next?

[Read v.17-19]

Q: Whereas v.8-12 showed that Abraham believed God even though he did not know "where", "how", or "when", what is illustrated here?

A: Abraham believed God when he did not know "why".

Point: We know that God will work things out in our life "somewhere", "somehow", and even at "some time", but biblical faith requires trusting in His Word and ways even when it's not fully revealed why.

[Read v.20]

Q: What is the example of faith demonstrated in Isaac?

A: Such strong faith in God's Word that although it would never come to pass in His own life, He passed on to Jacob God's Word given to him through Abraham.

Point: Biblical faith trusts in God's Word regardless of when it will come to pass, even if not until future generations.

[Read v.21]

Q: What was the odd thing that happened when Jacob blessed Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh?

A: Jacob switched his hands, reversing the positions of the elder and the younger.

Point: Although Jacob's physical eyesight was gone at this time, he still saw things correctly by faith.

Q: Why might it be significant that Jacob worshiped atop his on staff?

A: A staff was a symbol of authority. Joseph, as appointed ruler of Egypt, would have held a staff some would have considered of greater, earthly authority than that of Jacob's, representing only about 70 people at the time.

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Point: Jacob had greater faith in God's authority represented by his own staff than even the greatest earthly authority represented by Joseph's staff. He trusted God to accomplish His Word by His own means.

[Read v.22]

²²By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones.

Q: Since the Bible as we know it did not exist at this time, how is Joseph's actions a reflection of his faith in God's Word?

A: Joseph would have known of God's promise to Abraham (Gen. 15:13-16) that Israel would one day be delivered from Egypt.

Point: Biblical faith does not place its trust in the old life but the new.

[Read v.23-29]

²³By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

Q: Looking at these attributes of Moses' faith overall, what is the unique common denominator tying them together?

A: Moses had faith in the greater work of the Messiah to come and sought to be part of His kingdom rather than any earthly kingdom.

²⁴By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, ²⁵choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, ²⁶considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward.

Q: What are the repeated key words in this passage?

A: "Endure" (v.25), "looking to" (v.26), "endured" (v.27), "kept" (v.28), "passed through" (v.29). They're all references to enduring circumstances which weren't always optimal from the world's point of view because by faith Moses saw the greater working of God's will.

²⁷By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen. ²⁸By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that he who destroyed the firstborn would not touch them. ²⁹By faith they passed through the Red Sea as though they were passing through dry land; and the Egyptians, when they attempted it, were drowned.

Q: What is the example provided which contrasts the example of faith?

A: The Egyptians drowning in the sea because they had no faith to interpret God's works correctly.

Point: Biblical faith sees the greater teachings and lessons pointing to Christ behind the Word and workings of God.

[Read v.30]

³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days.

Q: What was unusual about the way Jericho fell compared to the rest of the cities in Canaan?

A: It was the only one accomplished by such supernatural means. Even though Israel was commanded to conquer the land, it was important that they do it in accordance with God's direction.

Point: Faith is evidenced by doing things God's way

[Read v.31]

³¹By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace.

Q: What are some of the things which distinguishes Rahab from all the others in this list?

1. Though she was "a harlot", she was saved by faith (Joshua 2:11).
2. She is a Gentile who is not only saved by faith, but who will be incorporated into the very seedline of the Messiah.
3. Her faith led to works (James 2:25) which were proof of the quality of her faith.
4. Her faith was contagious – she also won over her family. (Joshua 6:23)

Point: Through the example of Rahab we see the greater work of faith over the Law as well as the revelation that God's salvation is intended for **ALL** of mankind.

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³²And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, ³³who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵Women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; ³⁶and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated ³⁸(men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.

³⁹And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect.

¹Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

[Read v.32-40]

Q: How does the writer of Hebrew see Old Testament history?

A: As a record of victories of faith. Some were public and miraculous, such as deliverance from death, while others were private and basically ordinary, such as “from weakness were made strong” (v.34).

Q: Was the same result experienced by everyone found to have biblical faith?

A: No, some were delivered by faith, yet others did not escape. To those who did not escape, however, there was given a kind of boost to their faith that they might bear the suffering.

Q: How does this final passage come full circle to tie into the opening thoughts of this lesson?

A: The writer of Hebrews began by reminding them of their own sufferings and perseverance by faith, of having to trust in what they have yet to actually see. He provided biblical examples culminating in a summary confirming that their faith is being tested and refined exactly as that of every proper example of biblical faith.

Q: What are the four “better” things that are discussed in the book of Hebrews?

1. The better priest.
2. The better sacrifice.
3. The better sanctuary.
4. The better covenant.

Q: How is this summarized in this lesson of faith?

A: “God...provided something better for us...” (v.40) All faith is ultimately realized in its fulfillment in the Messiah.

Point: *Whether we are temporarily granted a reprieve or not from earthly trials and tribulations is not the ultimate destination of biblical faith, but enduring all things for the sake of something better in the Person of Christ.*

[Read v.12:1-3]

Q: The author of Hebrews spent all of chapter 11 getting us to look back at the great saints of the Old Testament. What is he now doing?

A: He’s urging us to look away to Jesus.

Q: How is the illustration of an arena or sporting event being presented here?

A: The spectators are the heroes of faith listed in chapter 11, the runners are the believers going through trials, and the goal is Christ who has already run the race of faith and conquered for us!

Q: What is it we first need to do before “fixing our eyes on Jesus”?

A: We must get rid of the weights and sins which make it hard for us to run; in other words, to “lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us”.

Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press

on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.

Philippians 3:12-16

Q: Jesus went through many trials while on earth. What was it that helped Him through to victory?

A: "The joy set before Him".

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy,
Jude 24

"These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.
John 15:11

"But now I come to You; and these things I speak in the world so that they may have My joy made full in themselves.
John 17:3

Point: The proper application of biblical faith is found in rejecting sin, enduring all earthly circumstances, while fixed on Jesus the example and goal for our life. We need to get our eyes off of ourselves, other people, life's circumstances, and affix them on Christ alone.

Overall Application

How well do the following relate to the quality of your own faith?

- God works through faith and faith alone. Exercising faith is the only way to please Him and receive His blessing.
- Faith is a gift from God through the Word and the Spirit. It is not something we "work up" for ourselves.
- Faith is always tested. Although at times it seems foolish to trust God, faith always conquers in the end.
- To complete the work of faith, one always needs endurance.