

What Does "Faith" Mean?

by Maurice Barnett

Hebrews 11:6 says that *"without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he that cometh to God must believe that He is and is the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him."* Indeed, no one can be saved without faith. Yet, we are not born with faith. Neither does it come to us by some miracle from God, placed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We do not receive it by some manner outside of, or even contrary to, our own will. There is only one way we can have the necessary faith. Romans 10:17 tells us what that way is, and I quote, *"Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God."* We will see more evidence of this shortly.



The vital question is, what is saving faith? Hebrews 11:1 says, *"Now faith is assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen."* This is not a definition of faith but only tells us what faith does. It still does not tell us what faith is. We must seek the answer in the Bible.

I suppose that the most famous passage of scripture in the world is John 3:16. *"God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish but have eternal life"* This is often quoted, placed on bumper stickers, displayed on signs held up at ball games, painted on large rocks at roadside curves and in about every other way one can imagine brought to the attention of as many people as possible. That's fine. I agree with what the passage says, but *what does it say?* Many suppose it says that all we must do is accept with our minds, our hearts, that Jesus is the Lord and saviour and on that acceptance alone we are saved eternally.

I certainly do think that John 3:16 states a vital truth in a simple way. We MUST believe in Christ in order to be saved. But, to understand what that means we must know what "believe" means. Are you aware that there is more than one definition of the word, whether it is the noun, faith, or the verb, believe? Faith clearly means different things in different passages of scripture. Let's look at the Bible evidence.

First, the word, faith, is used as a synonym for the gospel that was preached as a contrast to the law of Moses. This is seen in the latter part of Galatians 3. For instance, Verse 23 says - *"But before faith came, we were kept in ward under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed."* It is a contrast between two systems of law, the Old and the New and thus it was something that was revealed. Verse 2 of the same chapter tells us that "faith" is what they heard. Notice. *"This only would I learn from you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith."* Thus, "Faith" was the message that was preached and heard whether or not anyone accepted it. This is why Romans 10:17 says that *"belief cometh of hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ."*

Second, faith and believe certainly do refer in some passages to the acceptance of facts about Christ. But, when it is so used, the scripture also points out that just acceptance of the facts about Christ is not enough. Though faith is listed as the first thing to be done, there are other things necessary in addition to faith that are necessary to please God. Look at John 12:42-43—

"Nevertheless even of the rulers many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: for they loved the glory that is of men more than the glory that is of God."

We are not interested at the moment to discover what “confess” means here except to note that it is more than just “believing.” The word believeth in this passage means they had accepted the truths about Jesus but would not act properly on what they knew. They would not confess to what they believed. Now, Acts 11:21. Preaching to Greeks was being done in Antioch of Syria. The text says—

“And the hand of the Lord was with them; and a great number that believed turned unto the Lord.”

Now, whatever was involved in “turning” was still more than just believing. One cant be with the Lord until he turns to the Lord but one cannot turn to the Lord until he first believes. So, it is believing plus turning just like the Jewish rulers in John 12 where it was believing plus confessing that was necessary to be with the Lord. Our next passage is Romans 10:12-14—

“For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek: for the same *Lord* is Lord of all, and is rich unto all that call upon him: for, Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?”

Notice the order of things. One cannot be saved until he calls on the name of the Lord. But, he cannot call on the name of the Lord until he first believes. However, he cannot believe unless he has heard the message of the preacher. Whatever is involved in calling on the name of the Lord, it is still more than just ones acceptance of the facts. We have seen that it must be - believe *plus confessing* - believe *plus turning*, and now it is belief *plus calling*.

We have already looked at Hebrews 11:6, but note it again—

“And without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing *unto him*; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and *that* he is a rewarder of them that seek after him.”

Did you get that? One must come to God in order to be with Him. But, he cannot come to God until he first believes certain things. Thus coming to God is more than just believing. *It is belief plus coming to God*. Our next passages will amplify what we have been pointing to here as well as adding something else necessary to acceptable faith. It is James 2:14:26. Though lengthy, we must get the whole context in order to get the effect of its teaching. Here it is—

“What doth it profit, my brethren, if a man say he hath faith, but have not works? can that faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked and in lack of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Go in peace, be ye warmed and filled; and yet ye give them not the things needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it have not works, is dead in itself. Yea, a man will say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: show me thy faith apart from *thy* works, and I by my works will show thee *my* faith. Thou believest that God is one; thou doest well: the demons also believe, and shudder. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith apart from works is barren? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, in that he offered up Isaac his son upon the altar? Thou seest that faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect; and the scripture was fulfilled which saith, And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness; and he was called the friend of God. Ye see that by works a man is justified, and not only by faith. And in like manner was not also Rahab the harlot justified by works, in that she received the messengers, and sent them out another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, even so faith apart from works is dead.”

Note that believe and faith mean the same thing in these verses; they are interchangeable. Just believing is not enough. It must be coupled with “works.” The word “works” here means obedience to Gods commands. You will see that in the illustrations James uses. Abraham was justified by works when he offered Isaac, something that was commanded by God. Without obedience, faith is imperfect and will not justify. In his obedience to Gods command to offer Isaac,

the scripture was fulfilled that said, "Abraham believed God." But, more of that shortly. We are only interested at this point in noting that there is more than just acceptance of facts. Here it is faith plus works that justifies. Now lets look at Mark 16:15-16—

"And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned."

Belief on hearing The Faith comes first. But, as we have already noticed, it is not enough by itself. If one doesnt believe the message, he will be condemned because belief is necessary. However, acceptance of the message is not enough. Jesus says it is believe plus baptism in order to be saved.

Now, we have seen that it is belief *plus confessing*, belief *plus turning* to the Lord, *belief plus calling on His name*, belief *plus coming to God*, belief *plus works* and belief *plus baptism*. It should be obvious that just acceptance in our minds of certain facts has never been enough with God. But, there is more.

Third, the word believe is used in scripture to mean complete confidence in someone. For instance, in II Timothy 1:12—

"For which cause I suffer also these things: yet I am not ashamed; for I know him whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to guard that which I have committed unto him against that day."

Note that statement closely. "Believed" here refers to complete confidence. This is likewise seen in several illustrations in Hebrews 11, that we will look at in a moment.

Fourth, faith may be used generally to include, in the word itself, obedience to command-to the commandments of God. It is not just mental acceptance of facts about Christ. It includes in the word an acceptance of all specified items in the gospel, placing complete confidence in God and obedience to the will of God. That is what makes one a person of faith.

Abraham is specifically singled out in the Bible as a person of faith. It is said in several different ways. Abraham gives us insight into being a person of Faith. Is it only a matter of mental acceptance of Gods existence? Or, perhaps, it involves putting ones complete trust in God. Certainly both of those. Yet, there is more to being a person of faith than just that, as we have already seen. Abraham enlightens us.

Romans 4:13 tells us—

"For not through the law was the promise to Abraham or to his seed that he should be heir of the world, but through the righteousness of faith."

This connects the word *righteousness* with faith. This verse specifically refers back to Genesis 12 that describes Gods calling Abraham out of his homeland to go into the land chosen for him. Yet, notice that there were commandments that went with that. Abraham had to do something. Lets skip to Hebrews 11:8 in the New Testament because it is telling us about this very event—

"By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed to go out unto a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing whither he went."

Here is the very heart of what faith is. Abraham not only accepted who God was but also put his entire trust in Him. He was told to leave his homeland and had no idea where he was going but God said "Go," so, he went. But, also note that it was by this complete confidence that Abraham obeyed God. There would have been no confidence in God if Abraham had not obeyed Him. Now, look at Romans 4:3—

"For what saith the scripture? And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness."

This verse is a quotation from Genesis 15:6. God promised Abraham that his posterity would be as many as the stars in heaven. Abraham not only accepted that but also acted upon it so that it became true. Again, we turn to Hebrews 11 and this time, verses 17-19—

“By faith Abraham, being tried, offered up Isaac: yea, he that had gladly received the promises was offering up his only begotten *son*; 18 even he to whom it was said, In Isaac shall thy seed be called: 19 accounting that God *is* able to raise up, even from the dead; from whence he did also in a figure receive him back.”

In this test of Abraham, God instructed the sacrifice of Isaac, the son through whom all promises would come. Abraham was going to obey the instructions and kill Isaac. Abraham had such confidence in God that he knew that if he did kill Isaac that God would raise him from the dead so as to fulfill His promise. God did not intend for Abraham to kill Isaac; it was just a test. But, notice that it was by faith that Abraham was obeying God. This is obedient faith. Now, lets cap this story of Abraham with James 2:21-24—

“Was not Abraham our father justified by works, in that he offered up Isaac his son upon the altar? Thou seest that faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect; and the scripture was fulfilled which saith, And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness; and he was called the friend of God. Ye see that by works a man is justified, and not only by faith.”

Nothing could be more plainly stated. Faith being reckoned for righteousness is not complete without obedience to Gods commands. But, now put Acts 2 into the picture.

Fifth, faith/belief may not only include acts of obedience but even specify the necessity to be baptized. On the day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2, their were hundreds of people who heard Peters sermon, were convicted of their sins and wanted to know what they had to do. Peter told them to repent and be baptized for the remission of their sins. Hundreds of them did just that. Now now to verses 41-44—

“They then that received his word were baptized: and there were added *unto them* in that day about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common.”

These people accepted the facts he presented, that is, they mentally believed, they repented of their sins and were baptized. But, after all was done, these obedient people were described simply by the statement that they had “believed.” That word included their obedience.

This same thing happened in Acts 16. Paul and Silas were in prison when an earthquake shook the building, loosing their bonds; it was past midnight. The Jailor was struck by the event, recognizing that Paul and Silas were exceptional individuals. He fell down before Paul and Silas and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Paul said he was to “*believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house.*” Paul taught the jailor and his household the word of God. He then baptized them, immediately. Verse 34 then says:

“And he brought them up into his house, and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, with all his house, having believed in God.”

The jailor and his family heard the word preached and mentally accepted it. It isnt specifically said but they also repented of their sins, a requirement as in Acts 2:38 and other passages. They were then baptized. Afer all that, it is simply said that they had believed. The word believed there included everything they had done, which was more than a mental acceptance of the facts about Christ.

We have yet another example of this in Acts 19:1-7. Paul encountered 12 men at Ephesus who had been taught by Apollos, Acts 18:24ff, who knew only the baptism of John the Baptist. John’s baptism was no longer valid after Pentecost. Paul asked these men, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” Their response was, “No, we did not so much as hear that the Holy Spirit was given.” Paul then asked, and take note of it, “Into what then were you baptized?”

Paul's question concerning belief was not about just their mental acceptance. Their answer told him that something was wrong with what they had accepted AND their baptism; the question included their baptism, everything they needed to do for remission of sin. Paul then baptized them again but in the name of Jesus instead of the name of John. One cannot be taught wrong and baptized right. The word "believed" in Paul's question included their baptism.

It should be clear that saving faith is much more than just acceptance of some facts no matter how sincere one might be with a faith that is limited to just such acceptance of a few facts.

































