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ACTIVE FAITH

By Andrew Brown

Few Christians define precisely what "faith" is. Dictionaries define it as "unquestioning belief, complete trust, confidence, or loyalty." Believers and unbelievers alike casually use the word "faith" as a vague and mysterious feeling that cannot be explained but somehow everyone "gets." According to them, one can have faith to do anything. How does God use and describe faith? If we put our minds and hearts to a diligent examination of the Bible, the truth concerning faith will be discovered.

In the Gospel accounts, faith is the only thing that the Lord Jesus marveled at. He was amazed at faith and the lack of faith. Undisputedly, faith is something of great worth in God's sight: **Without faith it is impossible to please Him [God], for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him** (Heb. 11:6). First, one must believe in God to qualify for faith. Since it is impossible to please God without faith, our ambition should be to pursue and excel in it. This is not a trivial matter. Salvation is graciously given by God and comes **through faith** (Eph. 2:8). **Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith** (Eph. 3:17). We are told to **[take] up the shield of faith** (Eph. 6:16) in order to stand against the principalities and powers that are against us. Paul instructed, **Continue in the faith** (Col. 1:23) and be **established in your faith** (Col. 2:7). Understanding faith is highly significant.

Faith and belief are synonymous; both are translated from the same Greek word, *pistis*. **Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen** (Heb 11:1). Faith is a "spiritual substance" that can be possessed and is *quantifiable* by God. Having faith brings its possessors confident expectation (hope) of unseen things and changes the way they carry on. **For we walk by faith, not by sight** (2 Cor. 5:7). The common implication of the masses is that confidence, or a faith-feeling, is the power that brings about the unseen. What makes up the

substance of true faith? How is faith obtained? What are the unseen things so confidently sought after?

Of the 243 New Testament occurrences of *pistis*, a beacon shines forth teaching us how to acquire faith. **Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of [God] Christ** (Rom. 10:17). The inherent power of His Word makes faith possible. The Living Word must have spoken in order to have faith. The believer needs something to believe and Christ supplies what should be believed. Though it cannot be seen, one can be certain of Christ's word. The conviction of true faith rests on the One behind the word. Believing what Christ has spoken directs the believer's thoughts and actions. This understanding brings light to all passages regarding faith.

No amount of conviction, confidence, or "mind over matter" thinking will allow someone to "walk on water." A word from the Lord is needed. **Peter said to Him [Jesus], 'Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.' And He said, 'Come!' And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus** (Matt. 14:28-29). Peter received a word from Christ and responded by walking on water. When Peter focused on the storm he doubted Christ's word was stronger than the storm and began to sink. The Lord rescued him and said, **You of little faith, why did you doubt?** (Matt. 14:31). Faith requires confidence (lack of doubt) *in His words* and a right response.

After the Lord was transfigured, a man asked some disciples to cast a demon out of his son. They had performed this task before (Matt. 10:1-7). This time, however, their efforts were unsuccessful. On His return, they asked Jesus why they couldn't drive it out. **And He said to them, 'Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, Move from here to there, and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you'** (Matt. 17:20). "Little faith" is no faith. These disciples attempted a miracle on an expired word that had commissioned their actions before but was no longer meant to provide power. They had no current applicable word to cast demons or to move mountains. The only excuse for stationary mountains is that Christ had not given a word for them to move. Faith requires God to speak, and if He did, as the words left your lips, with even small faith, the mountains would move. Faith requires a word from God and a proper response.

Recall the Lord's interaction with the Canaanite woman; she wanted her daughter healed from demon possession, But He did not answer her a word (Matt. 15:23). His silence left no opportunity for faith. Yet her persistence must have annoyed the disciples to the point that they implored Him, saying, 'Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us.' But He answered and said, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matt. 15:23-24). He was not commissioned to the nations yet, so she received no word nor could she steal a word directed to others. Finally, He spoke to her, **It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs** (Matt. 15:26). She obtained a word from Christ. Even though Christ insulted her by calling her a dog, she could exercise faith. **Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table** (Matt. 15:27). Instead of being offended, she agreed with His word and requested a dog's portion. The Lord was amazed by her faith. **O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish** (Matt. 15:28). This Gentile woman received blessing before the time because of great faith, even after harsh words.

As we study how God uses the word "faith" a definition emerges: *Faith is taking God at His word and responding accordingly.* This is what forms the faith-substance that God is so pleased with. If you believe God there must be a response. Some responses only require mental acceptance. In Scripture, God tells us many important facts, like Abraham was the father of Isaac, or Samson killed 1,000 Philistines with a donkey's jawbone, or Adam lived 930 years. All a believer can do is put these facts in his mind and assent to them. However, Scripture may give truths that require us to change our minds. For instance, Genesis 1 teaches the creation of the universe. God spoke and everything was created from nothing. Creation did not come about by millions of years of matter coming together and then the "Big Bang." **By 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** (Heb. 11:3). Faith's response is to believe God's word regarding origins. God speaks of the creation of man. If you believe the "Big Bang Theory" or evolution of man, the response requires a change of mind in submitting to His words.

Faith's response may also require a change of behavior. God's word says, **Do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit** (Eph. 5:18). Someone cannot merely say, "I believe God," but then go out and get drunk.

No. Faith here requires a physical response not to get drunk with wine. If there is no physical response, then there is no faith.

The faith that brings salvation from sins is a one-time event. **'What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?' Jesus answered... 'This is the work of God, that you believe (*pistis*) in Him whom He has sent'** (John 6:28-29). This work of faith permanently links the believer with the Savior and His outflowing life. The relationship with God begins here and deepens through acts of faith.

Let us examine some faithful men and their responses. Hebrews 11 illuminates numerous examples of faith: **By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous** (Heb. 11:4). God told the brothers how to give Him an offering. Abel responded accordingly, but Cain did a work of his own choice that was not God's prescribed work. Cain performed an empty ritual that pleased himself rather than God. **By 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** (Heb. 11:7). God told Noah, before it ever rained, to build the ark. Noah responded by building the ark. **By faith, Abraham when he was called, obeyed by going out...not knowing where he was going** (Heb. 11:8). God told Abraham to go, and he went. The difficulty and questions of the journey did not matter; **Abraham's faith was greater because it rested on the One Who is greater. Abraham would have offered up Isaac as an act of faith** (Heb 11:17). Without a word from God this would have been heinous—with a word, it was faith.

Righteousness in God's sight has always been by faith. The confidence of faith comes from understanding the power and surety of His word. God cannot lie (Titus 1:2). His voice **breaks the cedars** (Psa. 29:5). However, many do not believe He exists. Others believe He exists but do not respond since not all have faith (2 Thess. 3:2). Demons lack a proper response. The demons also believe and shudder (James 2:19). They "believe" in God, knowing He exists, but there is not a proper response. They will never submit to Him. We should make it our priority to please God through a proper response. Some may have believed at one time but have **shipwreck[ed]...their faith** (1 Tim. 1:19). Their response to faith is dead. **Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself** (James 2:17).

God desires an active faith that works and grows in responding to God. Paul speaks of **constantly bearing in mind your work of faith** (1 Thess. 1:3). After hearing a teaching about forgiveness, the disciples implored, **increase our faith** (Luke 17:5). A heart truly after God desires this growth. Studying God's Word rightly divided and responding accordingly nourishes the faith relationship. In our current dispensation, God is silent. The believer must study the Scriptures to uncover the faith God desires today.

Faith is not just a vague, wishful desire. Scripture provides a solid understanding of true faith and the words from the Lord to confidently believe: **The righteous man shall live by faith** (Rom 1:17). Satan's lies permeate the world around us. The majority of Adam-kind follow Adam's example and follow the enemy. Even Christianity has fallen prey to twisting and corrupting God's word. We have the opportunity to reverse this pattern of unbelief in our own lives. The admonition applies: **test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves** (2 Cor. 13:5). Are we reading and responding to God's words? Is our faith alive and well? (Verses from *NASB*.)

Let us not doubt as sinking Peter did. Let us take the hard words humbly as the Canaanite woman. Unlike the disciples in Matthew 17, let us make sure His words are directed to us for the given time. Let us rise up and believe God, breaking the pattern of sin through active faith that deepens our relationship with **the author and perfecter of faith** (Heb. 12:2).

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