

By Faith

M.W. Bassford
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Introduction.

- A. One of the most important attributes of religion all across the world is faith. Essentially, religion is the belief, whether reasonable or not, in something that cannot be perceived by the senses of humankind. This belief in the unknowable is so central to religion that "faith" is often used as another word for "religion."
- B. It is unsurprising, then, that faith plays an important role in the belief systems that shelter under the umbrella of Christianity as well. In the New Testament alone, the word "faith" is used 227 times. Beyond the realm of the Bible, what sets the various denominations apart is their faith in different things. Indeed, our English word "creed" comes from the Latin *credo*, which means "I believe."
- C. This great religious diversity appears even in the way that different groups of self-professed Christians think about the word "faith" itself. Everybody thinks it's necessary, but they're divided about why. Oceans of ink have been spilled debating where faith comes from, what faith is and what faith accomplishes. However, despite the great learning and good intentions of all of these debaters, quite honestly, what any man says is irrelevant to our salvation and our relationship with God. What matters is what God says through His word. Let's consider the Bible's teaching on this crucial subject, then, to learn what it means to live by faith.

I. What Is Faith?

- A. As we explore this question, we first need to pin down just exactly what faith is. There are a lot of possible answers to the question, but only some of them are spiritually useful. For instance, now that football season is starting again, now that football games are on TV again, there's one Scripture that religiously oriented fans love to write on posters and hold up for the cameras. It's John 3:16. This verse means a lot of things to a lot of different people, but many of those differences are the result of different definitions of faith.
- B. For example, there are lots of folks out there in the religious world who say that if I mentally agree that Jesus is the Christ, then in that instant of mental agreement, I am saved. They get that out of John 3:16 by defining belief in a theoretical way. They claim that faith is just a mental thing that can be separated from action.
- C. Now, there are a couple of problems with this, a Scriptural problem and a common-sense problem. Let's look at the Scriptural problem first. Hebrews 11:6 tells us that faith has two components. First, it is belief that God is—the kind of mental assent that our denominational friends call faith. In addition to that, though, it is belief that God rewards those who diligently seek Him. Now, if we truly believe that God rewards those who diligently seek Him, what are we going to do? Obviously, we're going to diligently seek Him by doing what He wants. Our faith will inevitably lead to action. Not surprisingly, that's exactly what we see through the rest of Hebrews 11: a bunch of heroes of faith who diligently sought God by doing what He wanted them to do. None of those guys were mental assenters. Instead, their faith moved them to obey Him.
- D. That's the Scriptural problem; now, let's look at the practical problem. Just using our common sense, it doesn't make sense that faith should be defined religiously as just mental assent. We don't use that mental-assent definition anywhere else in our lives. Let me give you an example. Let's say that next week, I get sick of preaching, quit, move back to Texas, and take up burglary to support myself. The first house I break into, I wake the homeowner, and, as I'm tiptoeing down the hallway, he appears at the other end with a 12-gauge pointed at me. He says, "If you take one more step, I'm going to blow your head off." Now, what do we know about me if I keep walking? Well, first of all, we know I'm not very smart, but we also know that I don't believe the guy with the shotgun. If I keep walking, I show that I don't have faith in his promise. Why? Because if I did believe him, I wouldn't keep going! In real life, faith and action go hand in hand.
- E. Now, let's apply this back to John 3:16. Is it true that everyone who believes in Jesus will be saved? Absolutely! Why? Because everyone who truly believes in Jesus and accepts Him as Lord is going to do what He says. You don't argue with Jesus any more than you argue with the guy with the shotgun. If we truly believe that Jesus is the only path to salvation, we are going to be very careful to do everything He tells us to do, and as part of that process, we're going to fulfill the Bible's plan of salvation. We're going to repent, confess, and be baptized for the forgiveness of our sins. That's what faith does. Faith doesn't just sit there and say, "Yes, I believe that Jesus is the Son of God," and not do anything about it. That's irrational! Nobody's that dumb. The fact of the matter is, all of those mental-assent people don't really believe that Jesus is Lord at all. They have more faith in the false doctrine of their teachers than in the promises of God.
- F. Now, this sounds harsh, but it's exactly what the Bible says. Look at Matthew 7:21-23. Here, we see Jesus' verdict on people who think they only had to believe without obeying. They come to Him crying, "Lord, Lord." They talk about all the supposed "miracles" they worked in His name. But the problem is, it's not the ones who just say "Lord, Lord," who enter the kingdom of heaven. It's the ones who do the will of the Father. It's the ones who obey. Now, folks can argue here all they want about whether they have to obey to be saved.

They can believe whatever they want. But on the day of judgment, they're not going to be judged by the belief they profess, but by their actions, and those who did not obey will be lost. There's no arguing with God.

II. Faith Before Salvation.

- A. Now that we've established that genuine faith always produces action, let's look at some of the things that faith produces before the moment of salvation, the things that are necessary to receive salvation. We see the first of these specified in 2 Corinthians 7:9-10—repentance. This repentance begins with godly sorrow, rather than with the sorrow of the world. Here's the difference: worldly sorrow grieves for the physical consequences of sin; godly sorrow grieves for the spiritual consequences of sin. If I mourn because my sin has gotten me in trouble, my sorrow is worldly; if I mourn because my sin has separated me from God, my sorrow is godly. Now, this passage seems very unimpressed with worldly sorrow, but there's a good reason for that. Over time, the memory of worldly sorrow fades. Just like the gambler who believes that this trip to the casino will be his lucky day, the heart moved only by worldly sorrow soon begins to believe that this next time, sin is going to be good, and there aren't going to be any bad consequences. As a result, he is easily enticed by sin. By contrast, if we are motivated by things above, we know that God will never be pleased by sin. Thus, it is godly sorrow that moves us to repent, to hate our sin and resolve to abandon it.
- B. There's one last thing we need to note about repentance here. It doesn't say that repentance CAUSES salvation; it only says that repentance LEADS TO salvation. Even after we repent, more of God's plan remains.
- C. The next step in this plan of salvation is confession, as described in Romans 10:9-10. The exact words we use to confess Jesus as Lord are not important; traditionally, we use Peter's confession in Matthew 16:16. What is important is that our confession be a public profession of our faith in Christ. Once again, though, this confession is not the final step in God's plan of salvation. Consider the language of Romans 10:10. Confession is something that is UNTO salvation. It leads toward salvation, but it does not accomplish it.
- D. What does accomplish salvation is the final step of this process: baptism. Many verses in Scripture describe baptism, but we're only going to look at one: Romans 6:3-4. This one passage, though, leaves no doubt about the purpose of baptism. Before we are baptized, we are dead in our trespasses and sins. During the act of baptism, we are buried in the water, just as our Lord once was buried. Then, just as our Lord was resurrected, when we come out of the water, we too are resurrected. Our sins have died with Christ, and we now can walk in newness of life. It is by faith that obeys in baptism that we are saved.

III. Faith After Salvation.

- A. However, as important as all of these steps leading to salvation are, genuine faith does not stop working at the point of baptism. Instead, our faith leads us to do a number of things after our initial salvation, and these things too are connected with the promises of God. For a good example of this sort of action, let's look at Colossians 3:2-4. This is a useful passage because it gives us a big-picture look at Christianity. In the New Testament, we are commanded to do a number of different things. In every instance, it is at least implied, if not directly stated, that we must strive to obey this commandment if we want to make it to heaven.
- B. As Christians, it is essential that we devote ourselves to fulfilling these commandments. However, just going down through the checklist is not what God expects us to do. The problem with this checklist mentality is that it leads us to shoot not for the spiritual maximum, but the spiritual minimum. We start asking how little we can do to justify checking off that spiritual check-box, and end up going down the same road as the Pharisees.
- C. This is why general passages like Colossians 3:2-4 are useful. They remind us that Christianity is not a series of little unrelated tasks. Instead, it is one single all-embracing effort to seek God. This absolutely includes doing every single thing the Bible tells us to do, but it also includes application of spiritual principles in our lives, so that we don't just try to do what God wants us to do; we try to become the people He wants us to be. Whenever we consider some questionable practice in our lives, we should never ask, "How can I read the Bible to justify my doing this?" Instead, we must ask, "Is this activity bringing me closer to God?" In Colossians 3:4, we see what will happen if we live in this way. We see God's promise to us. We have His word that if we spend our lives giving Him the glory, on the day of judgment, He will glorify us together with Christ.
- D. Colossians 3, then, tells us how we have to live. Hebrews 3:14 defines how long we have to live in this way. It tells us that if we want to become partakers of eternal life with Jesus, we have to remain steadfast in our faith. We have to hold the beginning of our confidence firm to the end. A lot of denominations out there teach a doctrine we know as once-saved-always-saved. Basically, they say that if you ever have that moment of mental assent to Jesus, no matter what happens from then on, you can't be lost. Even if you plunge into every sort of spiritual corruption imaginable, even if you become an atheist, you will still go to heaven. Now, this is very comforting, but it's just not true. There will be no backsliders in heaven. We must continue to strive to be pleasing to God. We don't have to be perfect—that's what the grace of Christ is for—but we do have to keep trying as long as we live. If we want the crown of life, we must be faithful until death.

Conclusion. If you have faith in Jesus, but recognize that you haven't been serving Him, start living your faith now.