

WHAT EXACTLY IS FAITH?

By Denver Cheddie

It is not uncommon to hear preachers make utterances like, "reach out in faith", "extend your faith in this direction", "join your faith with mine and let's believe God for a miracle". It gives the impression that faith is some kind of extra sensory perception where you need to concentrate really hard. Or that exercising faith or walking in faith is like superman trying to shoot laser from his eyes for the very first time. Just ask some of these preachers to define faith, and they will give some round about definition using gimmicky terms which themselves need definition. Or they might just rebuke you for asking such an unspiritual question. *"If you understood what faith was, then you wouldn't ask. That very question reveals a heart of unbelief."*

After a Benny Hinn crusade in Trinidad (1999), there were lingering questions raised about the authenticity of many of the "healings" which were alleged to have taken place. In response to this, one Christian lady defied,

"All of these people are questioning whether this one was really healed, and that one was really healed. I don't question! I am not letting anything steal my faith. I just believe."

Believe what? Believe a lie just for the sake of believing? Is this faith?

In this article, I attempt to describe faith in as practical a manner as possible. I will use the teachings of Jesus himself, examples from the life of Abraham, and give practical examples of how we can exercise faith today.

Recognition of Jesus' Authority

People erroneously believe that unbelief is an attitude of doubt. It is not merely an attitude. Consider a couple of scriptures.

Matthew 8:8-10. *The centurion answered and said, "Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, 'Go', and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus hear it, He marveled and said to those who followed, "Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith not even in Israel"*

In Matt. 8:8-10 (cf. Luke 7:7-9), Jesus marveled at the "great faith" of the centurion. The centurion had told Jesus to just speak the word, and his servant would be healed. What was the rationale for this? He recounted that he himself was a man under authority, having servants under him. In other words, because of his position of authority, he could just speak the word and his servants would heed. He recognized this same authority in Jesus, hence his request, "just speak the word". **His great faith was not an attitude of belief, but a recognition of Jesus' authority.**

Contrast this with Mark 6:1-6. Here Jesus, once again, marveled, this time at the unbelief of his countrymen. It said that because of their unbelief, he was unable to perform many mighty works, except heal a few sick folk. Was it an **attitude** of unbelief permeating the congregation that prevented Jesus from performing miracles? Many pastors claim that they are unable to heal their sick for that reason. It should be remembered that Jesus often performed mighty miracles in the presence of the ever scrutinizing

Pharisees. In Mark 6, the people were astonished at what he taught them, but would not recognize his divine authority. "*We know his parents. He is a carpenter. He cannot be God.*" They were offended. This is what the Bible calls **unbelief - a rejection of Jesus' authority**.

It is indeed amazing that preachers would chastise the sick for their unbelief after they came forward for prayer and were not healed. The fact that they came forward is evidence that they had faith. Jesus did heal a few people in his home country, despite the general unbelief. Those who rejected his authority obviously never came for healing, but the few who did come, received. That's the common sense interpretation of the Bible. The reason why so many today don't receive their healing is because the preachers who purport to possess healing power, really don't.

These were the 2 times that Jesus was said to have marveled. The centurion's great faith was really a recognition of Jesus' authority, while his countrymen's unbelief was really a rejection of his authority. Thus true faith cannot be separated from the person and authority of Jesus Christ. Any doctrine which teaches that we need to have faith in our faith or faith in our words, rather than faith in God, is false doctrine.

Knowledge of God's Promise

True faith entails knowledge of what God promised. It is the assurance of things hoped for (Heb. 11:1). A hope is an expectation based on a promise

of God. To have faith for something God did not promise is presumption. Usually, when the word faith is mentioned in the bible, it is speaking of faith for salvation. The promise of God concerning salvation is that God provides it free of charge to those who do not try to earn it. This knowledge is critical for true faith.

Knowledge may be a definite promise from God's word, or it may be based on the general nature of God. For example, in Matthew 6:30, Jesus rhetorically asked, "If God so clothes the grass of the field ... will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?" To my knowledge, there was no definite promise in the OT that God would "clothe us". So Jesus is asking us to have faith based on the general knowledge that God cares for us.

At this point, I'd like to caution people about basing their faith on direct revelations from God. Not that God is unable to directly reveal things to us, but our minds are also able to play tricks on us. Faith must be based on knowledge of God or something God definitely promised. Faith cannot be based on what we covet.

Belief That God Can Perform

After we obtain knowledge of the promise, we must be convinced that God is able to fulfill his promise. Abraham was fully persuaded that God was able to do what he promised (Rom. 4:21). God promised Abraham that he would

have a son in his old age, and that through him, he would be the father of many nations. Abraham considered the deadness of his body, and the deadness of Sarah's womb, and concluded that the only impossibility was for God to lie. He was fully persuaded that God was able to do what he promised. Romans 4:21 is about the best definition of faith you'd get in the Bible. God promised and we believe his promise.

Although the Bible says that Abraham did not waver (Rom. 4:20), we know that he did try to help God by having a child with Hagar. How do we reconcile that? Even after Ishmael was born, Abraham laughed when God told him that it was Sarah who would have the son (Gen. 17:17). Clearly Abraham had misgivings about this whole thing. It was difficult for him to believe it. This tells me that faith is not merely a mental thing, because although Abraham had mental misgivings, he never wavered in his faith. Biblical belief is more than just mental head knowledge. It is not the ability to concentrate or focus on positive things. Whatever faith is, Abraham had it without wavering even when he laughed and said "Shall a child be born to a man who is 100 years old?" and "Shall Sarah who is 90 years old bear a child?" **I believe that faith is evaluating all of the possibilities and impossibilities, and then choosing to believe God over all of our mental misgivings.**

Trust in God

Finally we must trust God to do what he promised. This often involves acting on our faith. Faith is an active reliance on God. God promised Abraham that

in Isaac his seed would be established (Heb. 11:18). So when God told him to kill Isaac, Abraham was convinced that God would raise him from the dead if he had to (vs. 19), but the promise must be fulfilled. It would have been meaningless for Abraham to have faith, but not act on God's command to kill Isaac (James 2:20-24). Faith without works is dead. Another example is when Jesus told Peter to step out of the boat and walk on the sea. It would have been meaningless for Peter to have faith without acting on Jesus' command. Could you imagine Peter sitting put on the boat, saying, "I believe you Lord...from here"? True faith often involves some sort of action which proves that we really trust God.

Examples

Salvation

To be saved one must have faith. The promise of God is that through Christ, the price of sin is paid in full, and we have full access to salvation. Then we must believe the promise and be convinced that God really did provide salvation through Christ and will eventually glorify us. We must recognize Jesus' ability and authority to do that. Finally we must trust in Him totally to fulfill this salvation by grace, and not in our own ability to be good. This is usually a big step for most people, because they find it difficult to let go of the inveterate idea that they must be "good" to go to heaven.

How could parents have faith that God would make something great of their children's lives?

The way of presumption is to take a hands off approach, "just believe", and leave them to God. We must first of all find out the relevant promises of God concerning parenting. A good one is Proverbs 22:6. It is a timeless guarantee that if we train them in the way they should go, when they are older, they WILL NOT depart from it. We must then believe that this is true and that God will really fulfill his part if we do ours. Then we must show that we trust God by doing our part. We must act on the command to train them properly. I don't think that entails taking a hands off approach, allowing them to listen to every kind of music, watch everything on TV etc. This is where most parents err. Faith is trusting that as we train them properly, God would instill in them staying power that would always keep them serving God.

Studying

Students preparing for exams must not just expect God to supernaturally guide them in the exam room, or give them a vision of the exam paper. Some students, even if they see the exam paper, would not know what to do about it. There are numerous scriptures which promise God's favor to the righteous (Prov. 12:2 for example). Proverbs also offer many promises to those who are diligent. They must then trust that as they do their part (study), that God will bless their mind and their ability to retain and apply information, and give them calmness during the exam.

Finances

God promised to bless us financially if we adhere to certain principles. He does not give us wealth, but rather the power to get wealth (Deut. 8:18).

Our faith is not that God will cause money to fall from the sky, that an angel will deposit \$1M in our bank account, or that we will win the lottery. Rather as we work diligently and give generously, we trust that as His children, He would give us favor, and hence cause us to prosper through natural means. The key to prosperity is not positive confession, but hard and diligent work. We must have faith in the promises GOD gave. There are also many other scriptures which speak of God blessing those who are generous (e.g. Prov. 19:17; 2 Cor. 9:6; Phil. 4:19). When we give, out of a generous heart, we are ACTING in faith on God's promise to bestow favor on those who are generous.

Healing

What about healing? Many people believe God for physical healing yet never receive. If there was a definite promise that God would heal in this life, then we believe that as we do what God said to do, we would be healed. The problem is that God does not always heal. Why God chooses to only heal sometimes, I don't know. Maybe it's because He wants us to maintain a heavenly rather than earthly perspective. I can only speculate. But God never promised that He would invariably heal sicknesses in this life.

Conclusion

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for (Heb. 11:1). We must first of all have a hope – an expectation based on a definite promise of God. Usually a command accompanies the promise. When we demonstrate our faith by

obeying the command, God delivers. Unbelief is an utter rejection of God's truth. Faith is an active reliance on God based on a conviction that God is able to do what He promised.

(c) 2002, 2007 Denver Cheddie

All Rights Reserved