

Introduction

Everyone has faith of some kind. From the most fanatical religious fundamentalist to the most militant atheist fundamentalist everyone has faith. Whether you are Richard Dawkins peddling the so-called *God Delusion* or Alister McGrath countering with *The Dawkins Delusion* you have faith in something. The difference between them is where, or in what, they have placed their faith.

The question I want you consider now is not whether you have faith but rather whether or not the things you believe and trust are *faith-worthy and true*.

What is Faith?

Faith means different things to different people. This is where some of the confusion arises. I don't have time in this context to look outside the Christian fold so I am going to limit myself to some of the truths and distortions from within the Christian community.

First the Biblical View of Faith:

1. Faith' means having confidence and trust – belief in action
2. Faith means having confidence and trust in someone – God
3. It is not a 'leap in the dark' which a person must take without thinking. It is trust in a God whom we believe to be trustworthy.
4. Faith means entrusting your life to this trustworthy God - Abraham
5. Faith means seeing things from God's perspective – the Centurion

“In Christianity the value of faith depends upon the object towards which the faith is directed. So it looks outward to the God who is there, and to the Christ who in history died upon the cross once for all, finished the work of atonement, and on the third day rose again in space and in time. This makes Christian faith open to discussion and verification.”

Francis Schaeffer

Faith – Emunah

One of the keys to understanding the biblical concept of faith is to understand the riches of the word that is used for faith. Emunah עֵמוּנָה first appears in the Bible as part of the story of the battle with the Amalekites. (**Exodus 17:9-12**) The story itself gives us an idea of what is meant by biblical faith. Emunah is translated “steady” - possibly not what would immediately come to mind for most Christians. Together with this association is the statement in Psalm 26:1-3

Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have led a blameless life; (*walked in my integrity* NASB)

I have trusted in the LORD without wavering.

Test me, O LORD, and try me, examine my heart and my mind;

for your love is ever before me, and I walk continually in your truth.

From a Biblical perspective faith means having confidence and trust in God – a belief which is demonstrated in perseverance, a “steadiness” which endures and is not reliant on circumstances. Not so much blinding moments of ecstasy but steady faithfulness.

Isaiah 40:31 *Yet those who wait for the LORD Will gain new strength;
They will **mount up** with wings like eagles (nesher),
They will **run** and not get tired,
They will **walk** and not become weary.*

Please notice the progression in this verse. Mount up, run, and the climax of the verse, walk! Now if most Christians had written this verse they would have put it the other way around. Walk, run, mount up, because we have this view of faith. Always looking for the spectacular, the avant-garde the unusual. Yet the climax of this verse is walking without growing weary. The New Testament equivalent of this verse is repeated more than once;

Galatians 6:9 Let us not lose heart in **doing good**, for in due time we will reap if we do **not grow weary**.

2 Thess 3:13 But as for you, brethren, do **not grow weary** of **doing good**.

Hebrews 12:3 For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will **not grow weary** and lose heart.

Faith takes us beyond our understanding

Faith is sort of a sixth sense. It is the sense of knowing something even though you can't touch or understand it. It usually comes as a result of reason. But reason will only take you so far. At this point the skeptic reaches a dead end. He is trapped by his own understanding and ego. The very thing he thinks makes him insightful and in control is in reality keeping him from insight and trust. He could really know; if only he didn't think that he already does.

The person of faith, on the other hand, uses this point of the end of his own understanding as a portal between his known world and the world of the infinite. He thinks: "I have reached my limits, it is time to reach beyond my limits."

Faith means knowing that regardless of what your five senses tell you, regardless of the limited capabilities of your mind to understand, there is a sixth sense that tells you, you are not alone

It may be helpful to understand this truth through the eyes of a child:

A child walks into a room and his/her mother is not there. All of his/her reasoning comes to the conclusion that mother is gone, possibly forever. The child who taps into her sense of faith, however, "knows" mother wouldn't leave her forever. She can't see, smell, feel, hear, or talk to mother. She can't understand why mother would be anywhere else but here. But she has faith that mother will be here shortly. Because she knows, through knowledge beyond her understanding, that mother would never leave her.

Faith means knowing that regardless of what your five senses tell you, regardless of the limited capabilities of your mind to understand, there is a sixth sense that tells you, you are not alone. Her senses tell her that her mother is not there. Reason tells her that mother is not there. So the child who relies only on her five senses and limited by them in her experience of being mothered.

This may be the reason why Jesus said to Thomas, after he had seen and touched the risen Lord, "*Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*"

Ephesians 2:8-10

- 8 For it is by grace you have been saved,
through faith—and this not from yourselves,
it is the gift of God—
9 not by works, so that no one can boast.
10 For we are God’s workmanship,
created in Christ Jesus to do good works,
which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Paul, James and the great distraction.

Anybody who has done a course in New Testament studies has come across this issue. Often it is presented as the contradiction between Paul and James.

James says,

¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

... ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

Paul and James, both highly respected Jewish teachers, taught as any good rabbi did – with both hands. Paul and James did not contradict each other; but rather they complemented each other. What both men wrote was inspired by God (**2 Tim. 3:16**) and true. Paul’s focus was on the unsaved person and how they might get right with God. James’ focus was on the saved person and how they might show their faith and demonstrate the reality of their faith.

During the reformation the false teaching of earning one’s salvation by good deeds was a major issue in the established church. The reformers quite rightly challenged this “works righteousness” as a denial of the concept grace so clearly taught in the Scriptures. Luther was so committed to this cause that he was troubled by James’ statement. Luther famously referred to James as, “an epistle of straw”.

The actual quotes are:

Therefore St James' epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.

(Luther's Works 35, 362)

The epistle of James gives us much trouble, for the Papists embrace it alone and leave out all the rest...Accordingly, if they will not admit my interpretations, then I shall make rubble also of it. I almost feel like throwing Jimmy into the stove, as the priest in Kalenberg did.

(Luther's Works 34, 317)

What Luther failed to do was to teach with both hands! It is not “either/or” but “both/and”. This radical view has permeated protestant thought to the extent that faith has become an abstract intellectual exercise. Faith is about what you believe. It is about doctrine and creeds and holding the correct opinion. The action or “works” element of faith is almost ignored. For this reason the gospel suffers and the Christian community is guilty of what may be called “cheap grace”. All blessing and no personal cost. It was this understanding that prompted Deitrich Bonhoeffer’s criticism of a discipleship based on “cheap grace.”

“To operate with cheap grace is to rely on God's forgiveness as an excuse for not being involved in the struggles of living out God's-will for us.”

In their book *The church in response to Human Need* the authors state,

What makes people Christian is not primarily their personal experience of grace and redemption but their *ministry*. Indeed, the new Christian receives forgiveness, justification, and sanctification *in order to* become a servant. Being called by God to faith in Christ means simultaneously being commissioned by God to perform a task in the world. If we play down this dimension in our evangelistic outreach, we are offering cheap grace.

Put more simply, “Not faith plus works but faith that works.”

John Calvin put it very helpfully, “Faith alone saves *but* the faith that saves is not alone”

“**Brothers what shall we do to be saved?**”

This connection between saving faith and action is demonstrated throughout the Bible. Let me leave you with one or two of my favourite examples.

John the Baptist recognised this connection when he saw them the Scribes and Pharisees (and in Luke the crowds) coming for baptism. “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” In other words lets see some action to back your repentance. (**Matt 3:8; Luke 3:8**).

In **Acts 2** Peter preaches and people in the crowd respond to his preaching. It is important to note that they immediately associate a faith response with action. They do not ask what must we believe? This is not a new teaching that has to be understood in some abstract way. Instead they ask, “Brothers, what must we do to be saved.”

This emphasis on the connection between faith and action will challenge us about how we live our faith. For many of you it will be a reminder to break out of the abstract approach to your relationship with the Lord into a more practical way of living as a child of God. For others it will highlight the challenges of living by faith. The struggles which are common to the life of faith and the examples of the heroes of faith whose experiences inform us.

Stay turned!