



**Faith**  
**Taking God at His Word**  
**and Acting Upon It**

by

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**Abstract:** Arising from the author's personal struggles with faith, this devotional takes a careful look at how both the Old and New Testaments define and describe faith.

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# Faith

## Taking God at His word and acting upon it.

### ***I. A Search Commenced***

There are three Great Ones in the life of every human being – especially in those of Christians. These are hope, love and faith. They drive the engine of life and action and when any one of these take a hit, the other two suffer as well.

This happened to me not too long ago when a dear friend of mine began to question the basic tenets of the Christian faith after reading a book entitled *What Rough Beast?* by David Penchasky which portrayed God as a monster and someone who was out to get humans. Her re-examination of the faith she'd been brought up with also shook mine. I struggled with the idea of whether or not I should set aside my faith, everything that I'd already worked through, and go back to doubting, so that I could have a “firmer” foundation at the end. Tearing up your foundation in order to rebuild it is like jumping into water that's over your head when you can't swim – it's crazy. What is bizarre to me today is that I thought that re-evaluating my faith in this way was the way to go. But as I was pondering this one verse popped into my head again and again: “Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”<sup>1</sup> At that moment I myself was neither sure nor certain.

In my desire to “know” God I was very close to making the mistake that many have made in their quest to apprehend the Divine: focusing on cognitive, intellectual knowledge. Our modern style of thinking enjoys picking at things we consider true, trying to disprove them. One modern-day scientist pointed out that the laws of science are only true because they haven't been proven false yet and that the point of science was to disprove what we already know and replace that with new ideas. Some people like to do the same thing with questions pertaining to faith. Something is “proved” to them as true and they accept it for the time being. Then, later, when challenged by something that seems incompatible with their faith – or even if *seemingly* challenged by something, they take it out and re-examine it, sometimes discarding it for the “new”, sometimes retaining it. But in the end effect neither action changed anything in the way they lived.

Was it right for me to re-examine these things in such a critical light – things I *knew* to be true because they were rooted in God Himself? In the end the answer was no. Certain questions once answered satisfactorily should not be reopened. If they are true they are true and they will not change being true. These truths – among them the character of Jesus Christ and the veracity of the Bible – are rooted in the character of God and He does not change. Therefore they will not change.

My encounter with a serious doubter that I loved made me stumble in my own walk. I tried to stand on these truths that I *knew* in my head must be true, but that didn't feel true, because someone I cared about was questioning them so deeply. In a sense I was in danger of discarding things that I knew in my head because I didn't *feel* they were right. Looking back I sometimes marvel at how I was swayed by my feelings in those days. I've always considered myself rather unemotional. However, my father reminded me that we humans are primarily emotional beings. That's why some people, when confronted with solid intellectual truths will shrug them off, because these truths make them feel bad. That's also why some people insist that faith is based in a massive experience where “the Holy Spirit moved.”

In all of this my faith suffered a staggering blow, so strong that it took me nearly eight months to recover. As part of this struggle I meditated on the verse “Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”<sup>2</sup> And also on, “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”<sup>3</sup> James explains in his letter that faith and doubt are incompatible and so one who doubts the fundamentals,

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<sup>1</sup> Heb 11:1 (NIV)

<sup>2</sup> Heb 11:1 (NIV)

<sup>3</sup> Heb 11:6 (NIV)

such as the existence of God, what He tells us about His character, or the truth of His Word, is “a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways,”<sup>4</sup> and like “the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.”<sup>5</sup>

During this time I realized that I ought to study what faith is in Scripture. At first the idea came to me so that I could write a study which would convince my friend that she was wrong, but as time passed I understood that I needed to do this for myself, so that my own faith would be strengthened and so that I could clearly and with certainty understand what faith was. I would like to take you along on part of this odyssey, and show you some of the things that God is teaching me as I struggle to grasp at least a small part of my faith.

## **II. Faith in Scripture**

### **A. Defining “Faith”**

To start the journey we should look at what the word “faith” means. According to the dictionary faith is “a confident belief or trust”, belief in God or religious conviction.” In some instances it means “loyalty” or “allegiance” to something or someone. Now defining faith as a “confident belief” is like saying that a dog is a canine animal. Synonyms are great, but in some instances they don’t cut it, because they just lead us around in circles.

In the use of the English language nowadays when we say we “believe” something (even if we do so confidently) we really mean that we hold it to be true in our head. Now the thing that differentiates a mere “belief” from faith is whether or not we act upon it. That is where the aspect of trust comes in.

I may say that I confidently believe that smoking is bad for one’s health and that one shouldn’t do it. Then as soon as I say that I pull out a cigar and light it up. What does that say about my belief in the negative effects of smoking?

When it comes to faith in spiritual matters we need to look at what Scripture says about faith. I’ll start in the Old Testament, because it came first and that’s where we find the foundations of our faith.

### **B. “Faith” in the Old Testament**

There is no explicit term for “faith” in the Old Testament. And this makes life difficult for those of us who speak English, as it did for those who spoke Greek and translated the Old Testament into the Greek. Both Greek and English are abstract languages. We can define ideas by applying nouns to them and then drawing adjectives and verbs from those nouns. Our sentence structure and grammar supports this. Often we will show action by using “to be” and tacking an adjective on the end, for example, “being faithful.”

Hebrew, on the other hand, is a concrete language. The *action*, rather than the idea, is at the forefront. The whole language is based on words derived from verbs. The idea is portrayed through action. For that reason they have verbs that we don’t in our abstract languages. They can say “being faithful” by simply using one word – we might say “faithing” – rather than two, one of which is a modified noun. As a matter of fact they have to modify the verb into a noun to get the idea across.

So Hebrew uses three verbs to describe what today encompasses the word “faith.” The first is “to be caused to be faithful or reliable” which we usually translate as “to believe” or “to put trust in.” Then there is “to trust” and thirdly “to fear.”

### **1. To Faith**

Abraham in Genesis 15:6 is “caused to be faithful or reliable” toward God and God “reckoned it to him as righteousness.”<sup>6</sup> Habakkuk uses the noun-form of this in his famous passage, “But the righteous will live by his faith.” In the margin of most English Bibles it is noted that this can also be translated as “faithfulness,” which from the etymology of the word would be the more correct translation, as this is the *only* place in Scripture that this noun is translated as “faith.” This probably arises from the translation of the word into Greek and the quote by Paul in Romans 1:17. So, from a

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<sup>4</sup> Jas 1:8 (NIV)

<sup>5</sup> Jas 1:6 (NIV)

<sup>6</sup> Gen 15:6 (NASB)

Hebrew point of view, one who is righteous will live by his faithfulness to God. The inner faithfulness would then be expressed by external acts, such as keeping the law, doing the sacrifices, etc.

Aside from this the causal form of the Hebrew for having faith makes it clear that it has its source outside of the believer. It is the other person or circumstance that *causes* you to be faithful to the other one, not that you “have” the faith in and of yourself. This is an important distinction because it removes the onus of creating the faith ourselves. It puts that burden on the one that we choose to have faith in.

## 2. To Trust

“Trust” is a favorite term of the psalmists and the wisdom literature authors. They cry out that they trust in God rather than in people or in circumstances and call the people listening to do likewise. Isaiah and Jeremiah also use this term extensively, comparing the Israelites’ trust in earthly things to the trust they *should* have in God. The prophets call for their listeners to prove their trust by specific action (or in some cases inaction). If the children of Israel will trust in God they won’t make alliances with other nations. They will stand firm, with their face like flint, as Hezekiah did in the face of the Assyrian army. They will *only* seek their help from God, not from circumstances around them. *That* is a pretty tall order. We tend to like to follow the Arab proverb: “Trust God and tie your camels carefully.” We do have a certain responsibility that we must fulfill, but there *are* times when we can’t – and shouldn’t – do anything; when we must stop running around trying to solve our problems and trust quietly and calmly. It is wisdom that teaches us when to act and when to rest.

## 3. To Fear

The third and last term used for faith in God in the Old Testament is “to fear” or “to revere.” Unfortunately our term “to revere” doesn’t quite capture the awe that God demands from His people. It has been watered down somewhat by our focusing only on the warm, fuzzy attributes of God rather than on His holiness, His power, and His justice.

Fear is Moses’ favorite term for describing the relationship of the Israelites to their God. These people have seen the awesome wonders (again based on the word “fear”) that God has done in Egypt. They are to be impressed by God’s holiness and power. Those who worship God are ones who “fear” Him. As with trusting God, the prophets contrast fearing God with being afraid of other, non-divine things. They point out that if you really fear God you won’t fear anything else. When you truly fear God you learn what is really worth fearing and what are merely shadows and dust.

### C. “Faith” in the New Testament

When we move to the New Testament we begin to deal with an entirely different language, one who expresses things rather differently from Hebrew. The abstract is at the forefront, not the concrete. The idea, not the action. In Hebrew the action points to the idea. In Greek the idea gives rise to the action. For that reason there is a noun that denotes “faith.” From this noun comes the verb for “having faith” or “placing faith in.” It also encompasses the idea of trust, combining the first two Hebrew ideas of faith. What is nice, though, is that Greek also has a word for “faithing.” However, the *causal* aspect of faith is lost in the transition.

Fear of God is still found in the New Testament, but it plays a smaller role than in the Old. People who believe in God still “fear” Him, but now more people “have faith” or “put their faith in” or “put their trust in” Him and what He says.

Now here’s something interesting about faith in the New Testament. The greatest chapters about faith are to be found in the writings of three authors: Paul in Romans and Galatians, James, and the author of Hebrews. Of these only Galatians is written primarily to Gentile Christians. Romans was written to a mixed congregation where there were Jews as well as Gentiles, perhaps more Jews than Gentiles. James and Hebrews are written primarily to Jewish Christians.

There isn't too much disagreement among preachers and scholars on the interpretation of Romans and Galatians, because Paul seems to use "faith" in a primarily abstract sense. However, we tend to struggle with James and Hebrews. The reason for this is that both of these writers are not thinking in an abstract, Greek pattern. They are thinking in the concrete terms of Hebrew. When they write "have faith" they are thinking "be caused to be faithful." They are thinking *action*, not *idea*.

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### **Excursus: Hebrew Thought vs. Greek Thought**

We must remember that the books of the New Testament are *not* Greek documents. They are primarily Hebrew or Jewish documents, as almost all authors were of Hebrew origin. The only person who could be considered to have written from a primarily Greek perspective would be Luke, who was Greek. However, much of what he writes is unquestionably tinted with Hebrew ideas and meanings. I guess living with Paul of Tarsus might do that to you.

Jesus was unquestionably Jewish, using Hebrew literary forms in His teaching, and lovingly quoting Deuteronomy and Isaiah. John is so Hebrew in his expressions that it has puzzled scholars who try to do studies of his books from a purely Greek perspective. Paul was schooled by Gamaliel and was a Pharisee, "a Hebrew of Hebrews,"<sup>7</sup> by his own admission. Luke spent years with Paul and absorbed many Hebrew ideas, which then flowed into his Gospel and his account of the Acts of the Apostles. Peter's mind-set was unquestionably Hebrew, it was what he grew up with and his influence on Mark, though he writes for Romans, makes even that Gospel Hebrew in its basis. Jude appeals to Hebrew apocrypha in his letter as well as punctuating his entire message in Old Testament examples – very rabbinical. James belonged to the Jewish party of the church and his book is the very example of Hebrew wisdom literature. The author of Hebrews very definitely is a Hebrew. He knows Scripture inside and out and bases most of his letter on Hebrew temple practices described in Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

For this reason when we approach the study of the New Testament we should set aside the Greek presuppositions that we have. I would argue that most Christians, perhaps with the exceptions of the Thomasites in India and the Assyrians in southern Turkey, Iraq and Iran, use Greek philosophical presuppositions in their approach to their study. It's not surprising – it's part of our church history. There is value in using Greek ideas, but the Bible is *not* primarily Greek. It is primarily Hebrew. God used the Hebrew language and culture for a reason, just as He later used the Greek language for a reason. But as we've already seen the New Testament was primarily written by Hebrews, not by Greeks. Even if they couch their ideas in Greek terminology and perhaps have assimilated a few Greek ideas, they are still Hebrew in essence.

It's like reading one of those books that they sell at international touristic sites, like Ephesus in Turkey. Often we Americans chuckle at the English used. Sure, they're writing in English, but the thought processes that produced that English were clearly from a different language and mind-set. It reflects in the expression, in the grammar, in the context and if you speak the language you can tell where they're coming from.

It is precisely the same with the New Testament. If we don't realize that we're not dealing with a Greek world view but with a Hebrew one we run into all kinds of problems and seeming contradictions in the New Testament that can usually be answered by interpreting them through the lens of the Old Testament. Now this is not a cure-all, but it certainly makes life easier when studying the Bible. When we do our word studies, we should look at the Old Testament meaning as well. When we look at the way the New Testament handles things we should take a more holistic view, seeing how it fits into the big picture, rather than dissecting it into its smallest parts and then trying to reconstruct the whole situation from there. So with this in mind, let's take a look at one of the key chapters on faith.

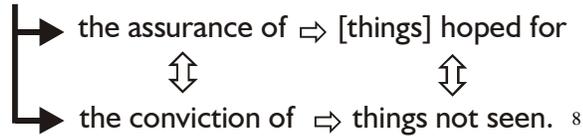
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<sup>7</sup> Php 3:5 (NIV)

### ***D. Abraham, the Prime Example of Faith***

It is in Hebrews that the greatest chapter of Faith is found. Again when we look at this, remember that within the term “faith” is not so much the abstract as the concrete – the action.

Now Faith is



Here the author of Hebrews asserts his Hebrewness. He uses a very typically Hebrew literary device called a parallelism, comparing two ideas with one another. Psalms and Proverbs are full of parallelisms. “Assurance” and “conviction” are compared, as are “things hoped for” and “things not seen.”

Things hoped for and things not seen are the same thing. If we quote Paul, “hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he *already* sees?”<sup>9</sup>

The idea behind “assurance” is one of confident reliance, or knowing that something is reality. “Conviction” carries once more the idea that we stand firm upon these truths and don’t waver. Then, in typically Hebrew fashion, the author begins to list example after example after example of people who had this kind of faith. Abel, Enoch, Abraham, Moses, an many, many more.

Let’s take a look at one of the important ones here – Abraham.

*By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*<sup>10</sup>

Abraham’s faith – or belief – in God’s promise caused him to act, to leave from his homeland and to go to Canaan, a land that he never possessed. Look at the commentary below.

*All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.*<sup>11</sup>

Unquestionably Abraham, Isaac and Jacob believed, but they did not receive what they were waiting for. Truly they had “the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen.”<sup>12</sup>

The key of Abraham’s faith, both in this passage and in James 2, is found in the verses 17-19.

<sup>8</sup> Heb 11:1 (NASB)

<sup>9</sup> Romans 8:24 (NIV)

<sup>10</sup> Heb 11:8-10 (NASB)

<sup>11</sup> Heb 11:13-16 (NASB)

<sup>12</sup> Heb 11:1 (NASB)

*By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, "IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED." He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.* <sup>13</sup>

The greatest expression of faith is when it takes action. Abraham's action was to sacrifice his son. He knew that God promised that He would give Abraham descendants *through Isaac*, not through Ishmael, not through the sons of Keturah, but through *Isaac*. And Here he was preparing to kill his son. James comments on this passage,

*Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS," and he was called the friend of God.* <sup>14</sup>

Abraham took God at His word. And not only did he take God at His word, he acted upon that word *without question*. Faith is taking God at His word and acting upon it.

***E. Old Testament Faith vs. New Testament Faith – A Discrepancy?***

Now this is where we sometimes get into trouble between the Old and the New Testament. Some claim that the Old Testament is about works and the New Testament is about faith. They're both about both.

The Old Testament takes a bottom up view. By your actions you prove your faith. Your actions tell me what you believe. This view is still prevalent in everyone who is not a Christian or born-again. You hear western non-Christians complaining what a bunch of hypocrites Christians are. The Muslims shake their heads at "Christian" television programming, such as *Dallas*, *The Young and the Restless*, or movies like *Fatal Attraction*, where western "Christians" are portrayed in lewd, immoral acts. I don't even want to mention the more explicit European entertainment. People look at our actions first and deduce what we believe from them. As a matter of fact when one new Believer in Germany was asked by a seasoned veteran which Gospel brought him to believe in Jesus Christ, his answer was, "The fifth Gospel." Puzzled, the older Believer asked him which apocryphal book he might mean. The young Believer shook his head and said, "I mean the life of other Christians and the way they lived out their faith."



The New Testament takes a top-down, causal approach, which we as western thinkers like better. Your faith is proved by your actions. Your faith will cause you to act in specific ways. For that reason we look first at the abstract and then talk about how to put it into practice.

The only real difference between the way the Old and the New Testaments portray faith is the perspective they look at it from. The results of the faith are the same: salvation.

**III. Why Faith**

At this point in my journey I came to a question. *Why* is it that faith is so important? The answer is found in Hebrews 11:6.

*And without faith it is impossible to please [Him], for he who comes to God must believe that He is and [that] He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.* <sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Heb 11:17-19 (NASB)

<sup>14</sup> Jas 2:21-23 (NASB)

<sup>15</sup> Heb 11:6 (NASB)

God demands faith. God demands that we be “caused to be faithful” to the fact that “He is” and that He rewards everyone who seeks Him – rewards them with His presence and salvation.

### ***A. Faith vs. the Mind***

But *why* faith? Why not the human mind? It is incredibly powerful. It has the ability to break down and analyze truths. It has the ability to decipher deep things. But it is also fallen. The human mind is twisted and does not understand God. To quote Paul, quoting Psalms in Romans 3:11, “There is none who understands, there is none who seeks God.”<sup>16</sup> Jesus points out that it is the Father who draws people to believe in Him. Perhaps *that* is why the Hebrew is “to be caused to be faithful.” It is pointing towards the fact that God is the one who *gives* us faith.

Besides our minds being twisted, they are also finite. We cannot grasp God. It’s like trying to take a string five centimeters long and wrap it around a barrel that has a circumference of one hundred centimeters. It just doesn’t work. We can understand a little bit, but the rest is mystery. Now mystery ... that would make another very interesting devotional.

Then there is the difference in intellect. Some people would have an unfair advantage over others. They could more readily grasp the deep truths and be saved than ones who are mentally retarded, or just simply not as bright when it comes to abstract stuff.

### ***B. Faith vs. Emotions***

Okay, if not the mind, why not the emotions? Humans are primarily emotional, aren’t they? Can’t we rely on our emotions to be saved? Well, we could if they weren’t so volatile. One minute we might be dancing around praising God and loving Him, and in the next be angry with Him, because He didn’t give us what we wanted. Emotions are too unstable to make a firm basis for salvation. If we relied on them, I could gain and lose my salvation a hundred times a day! And besides emotions have a tendency to drive us to keep an emotional high, so we egoistically feel good. Emotions are usually all about me, not about others. It’s about how *I* feel good and not bad. It’s about how *I* can get my next emotional high.

### ***C. Faith Alone***

The human will is tainted as well. There is *nothing* within us that could bring us to salvation. For that reason we need something from *without* that will save us. And that is faith. Faith is from without. God gives it to us. It encompasses the mind, the will, and the emotions. It alters them and strengthens them. We are caused to be faithful.

And the mystery of faith is that it is equal for *everyone*. You can be the most brilliant intellectual and still it’s faith that saves you. You can be completely mentally retarded and it’s still faith that saves.

It’s like Jerome at the college that I went to. He is a spastic. His family didn’t know how to deal with him and as a result he never studied much. You can barely understand him when he speaks. He’s confined to a wheel-chair, but you would never find anyone with a more burning love for Jesus than Jerome. His favorite song is “Because He lives I can face tomorrow” and if you let him, he’ll sing it for you until he’s blue in the face. His faith is alive and active!

In the same way there are brilliant men, such as Martin Luther, who realized that the only way that they could be saved is through faith in Jesus. They have written mighty works about this faith, they have stood for it, lost for it, and died for it. And sometimes, regrettably, they’ve taken the life from the faith by being *too* intellectual and not active enough.

## ***IV. Conclusion***

Faith is not merely intellectual assent. It’s not merely taking God at His word. I can do that and never change. Faith is taking action upon that word. Faith is active. Abraham acted. Moses acted. David acted. Jesus acted. Paul and Peter acted. The Bible is full of action. We see the actions of people and we judge

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<sup>16</sup> Rom 3:11 (NIV)

by them what they do or don't believe, what they put their faith in, what they have been caused to be faithful to.

Faith is not emotions. It is not a warm fuzzy feeling that we have when we worship God. It is not a one-time experience. It is an attitude that is proved by action. Faith is taking God at His Word and acting upon it.

Faith is standing firm in what you believe when a friend challenges you to doubt the basic tenets of what God has claimed are true. Faith is believing that people need help and so going out and giving it to them. Faith is loving from a broken heart, because you know it's right to do so, even though it hurts you. Faith is never stagnant, it is always active. It is not dormant, it is alive and moving. Faith is life. Faith works.

### Sources

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