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302 - The Word Of Faith

1. Introduction

What is faith? What does it mean to have faith. In this lesson we'll define faith and discuss how the Bible presents it as a body of information and a characteristic of believers. We'll explore the Bible as **The Word Of Faith** and why believers need to understand the relationship between the body of recorded facts and spiritual practice.

2. The idea of faith

The word faith means different things to different people. For some it refers to a particular belief system or worldview. To others it implies a quality of belief that specifies a certain intensity and degree of commitment. Most may see faith as a term that denotes trust or a relative degree of confidence on which they base their lives and activities. When we think about the Bible the idea of faith may mean a level of devotion to a set of teachings that characterize a religious ideology.

In this lesson we'll examine faith beginning with it's foundation and how it relates to a study of the doctrine of the Bible. We'll take a look at:

1. A definition of faith
2. God's definition of faith
2. The relationship between faith, the written word and doctrine
3. The written word as the faith of God
4. The relationship between faith and faithfulness

Let's take a look at each of these.

3. A definition of faith

A dictionary definition includes the following elements:

- a. Allegiance to duty or a person
- b. Sincerity of intentions
- c. Belief in and trust and loyalty to God
- d. Belief in the traditional doctrines of a religion
- e. Firm belief in something for which there is no proof
- f. Something that is believed with strong conviction
- g. Without doubt or question

Some of these reflect the overall idea that persists that faith is a subjective exercise of what one believes. If we examine the above stated elements we can see how the idea of faith can be misleading when we begin a discussion of the doctrine of the Bible. I'll review each of them

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and then we'll examine a scriptural definition that clarifies how God defines faith.

Allegiance to duty or a person is a personal commitment based on individual convictions and beliefs. Although one may subscribe to a standard for their conduct the content of their beliefs may emanate from any source including their own ideas. We can see that historically with various movements.

Sincerity of intentions doesn't really tell us anything about faith. If we gauge our ideas of faith on the perceived sincerity of individuals then we find ourselves once more in a subjective realm in which personal ideas define what faith is and how it's manifested.

Belief in and trust and loyalty to God is certainly an aspect of faith. As we go forward we'll see that belief and trust don't necessarily define the basis of a person's faith. There are some who have died believing in and loyal to God but what did they believe? What did they trust in? As we talk to people about faith one may declare they trust in God. When asked what they base their trust on the answer many times is a number of personal experiences and ideas that have shaped their beliefs. This places the idea of faith once again in the realm of personal subjective experience and not on an objective body of knowledge.

Belief in the traditional doctrines of a religion is perhaps the most familiar usage of the idea of faith. The doctrines of a religious body are recorded in a variety of ways and taught to those who enter that particular body. Although there's an objective element here in the traditions of a religious persuasion, it doesn't imply that this is based on the Bible. Religions throughout the world have their own scriptures, and in the Bible believing world, there are a multitude of doctrines. These doctrines are based on what the Bible teaches but closer inspection reveals significant alterations and additions. Within these bodies there are also wide ranges of practices and individual applications that identify a subjective nature to the followers faith.

Firm belief in something for which there is no proof is obviously what some think of Bible believers. There are some who believe in God but can't explain or support why they believe. As we move forward we'll examine our faith in light of proofs provided in the scriptures. While some have strong beliefs in something, without an objective basis for that belief, we can't really say they have faith in anything. Any belief held in this manner is purely subjective relying on the ideas of an individual or group.

Something that is believed with strong conviction might define faith in the lives of some but is it defensible? We might believe in something and have very strong convictions about it, but that doesn't make it correct or real. There have been cults that held ideas with a conviction strong enough that they were willing to take their own lives, or the lives of others, to achieve a goal. This type of belief is flawed and often dangerous. It relies on individual or collective subjective experience and is empowered in isolation of facts that could disprove it. Such groups limit contact and discussion with others to protect their ideas.

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Without doubt or question is an element of true faith in God as we'll see, but in itself doesn't verify the credibility of what's believed. When we turn to the Bible we'll have questions and there are times when we may doubt what we've learned. That isn't a lack of faith in the long run since the scriptures aren't above being scrutinized and evaluated. The believer who has genuine faith doesn't possess it because they haven't questioned or doubted. Their faith is founded on their knowledge that what they believe is valid, credible and logical. If we view faith as simply not questioning something we might be describing someone who has accepted something at face value and lacks a solid foundation for what they believe.

So what about this definition? Each of the elements I've examined have strong subjective influences. The definition given here is based on a secular or worldly interpretation of what faith is. But how does God define faith?

4. God's definition of faith

God supplies a definition of faith and in doing so provides a way to understand how it's linked to the written word, the content of what is believed, behavior of the faithful and the doctrine of the New Testament. The writer of Hebrews supplies this definition. "***Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.***" (Heb 11.1).

On the surface this appears to be a simple statement. The first verse of Hebrews eleven begins what we know as the great faith chapter. We have a definition followed by accounts of the actions of those who had faith in God. In order to fully appreciate this definition we have to examine the individual components. There are two of these:

- a. The substance of things hoped for
- b. And the evidence of things not seen

So, how does that define what faith is? What does that have to do with doctrine? We'll answer these questions based on the content of Hebrews eleven and other passages. We need to realize that God has provided a definition stated in few words that requires analysis to understand. If we isolate verse one from the rest of the chapter we'll lose the idea of what faith includes.

The definition of faith given here includes two components. The ***substance of things hoped for***, and, the ***evidence of things not seen***. As we explore these two statements we'll review a definition for the words "**substance**" and "**evidence**" so we understand what's being conveyed. Then we'll compare this to the list of the faithful given in Hebrews eleven. The definition God provides in verse one can be understood on it's own, but, we're given illustrations that supply a high degree of precision that aids comprehension.

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5. The substance of things hoped for

When we think of substance we think of something that has an objective presence. That can be a physical object, an event, or the content of ideas that are expressed. The English word substance can be defined as:

- a. Essential nature
- b. A fundamental characteristic part or quality
- c. A physical material from which something is made or which has discrete existence

In simpler terms substance is a characteristic of something that defines it's nature, essential quality and existence. It can be material in things like ingredients in a recipe or chemical formula, both of which are things that we understand. The substance of an idea or object is therefore consistent and has a credible validity to it. These are things we deal with every day, and while the terms here are more detailed than how we usually think, if we consider their application we'll find they make sense.

The Greek word translated as “*substance*” here is **ΥΠΟΣΤΑΣΙΣ** (Hupostasis). W.E. Vine in the **Expository Dictionary Of New Testament Words**, states that this refers to “*that which stands or is set under a foundation ... the quality of confidence which leads one to stand ... assurance*”. (W.E. Vine entries for **Substance and Confidence**). That provides a little information but doesn't really clarify the word for us. For that we have the examples in Hebrews eleven. As we look at each of these examples we'll identify the two parts of the statement - **substance** and that which is **hoped for**.

The first example from chapter eleven that gives clearer detail is that of Noah. The writer states, “*By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house...*” (Heb 11.7). The substance at the heart of Noah's faith was in the warning that God was going to destroy all flesh. That warning was conveyed **verbally** to the patriarch. The hope that motivated Noah to do as God instructed was that his family was going to be saved. So we can begin making a chart of these elements where we can list the **substance** in this example as the **warning from God**, and the **hope** as being **saved from destruction**.

A second example that gives detail is that of Abraham. “*By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.*” (Heb 11.8). We can identify the substance in this example as it's embodied in the promises given to Abraham. God told Abraham to leave his home (Gen 12.1). The Lord also promised Abraham that he would have a son and make a great nation from his offspring (Gen 12.2). He was to be given land that God would show him (Gen 12.1, Gen 15.18), and all nations would be blessed through him (Gen 12.3).

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We can identify the substance in this case as the promises that God made. Since this was the patriarchal period that was done verbally and later recorded by divine inspiration. The hope can be identified as the result of the promises. Abraham's offspring would have the land God promised, he was to have a son, and through him all families of the Earth would be blessed. Abraham had confidence in God and trusted that the promises would be fulfilled. Once again we see the substance identified as the word of God, and the hope as that which was promised.

Sara is the third example that we can turn to in this examination. God told the couple they would have a son as God had promised. The writer of Hebrews states, "*Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised.*" (Heb 11.11). As we saw with the example of Abraham, Sara had the **word** of God (**substance**) that embodied the promise containing the pledge that she would have a **son** (**hope**).

Joseph, the son of Jacob, understood the promises made to his great-grandfather Abraham. As he prepared to die he conveyed specific instructions to his family. "*By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones.*" (Heb 11.22). God told Abraham "*Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge; and afterward shall they come out with great substance. And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again...*" (Gen 15.13). The substance here is the **promise** made by God (**word**) handed down now to the third generation. Joseph remained confident that his family would return to the land and gave instructions to take his bones and bury them there (**Gen 50.25**). The land promise given to Abraham was the substance that gave the hope of it's fulfillment. We see that happen in the book of Exodus as the Children of Israel leave Egypt and take Joseph's remains with them (**Ex 13.19**). Again, the substance lies in the promise contained in God's word, issued three generations earlier, while the hope was in the possession of the land which we see fulfilled in the book of Judges.

In each of the examples given in Hebrews eleven we can view the **word** of God as being the **substance**, containing **promises** made, leading to something that was **hoped** for. Moses trusted the word of God and delivered Israel confident that they would see the fulfillment of God's promises. In the early examples of Abel and Enoch we can conclude that they followed the same pattern. God had spoken to them, they regarded what was stated as true and had confidence in what they were told. In each of these examples we can see that the substance, the element at the foundation of hope in God, rests in his word. In the Patriarchal period the word was spoken. In the Mosaic dispensation it was a combination of written and spoken commands. In the Christian dispensation we have the written word that embodies the substance of that for which we hope. We'll come back to this later, but first, let's examine the second element of faith as given in Hebrews eleven.

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6. The evidence of things not seen

The second component of the definition of faith given by the writer of Hebrews is the “*evidence of things not seen*”. The Greek word for evidence here is rendered from **ελεγχος** (**elegchos**) **Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon**, states that this refers to “*that by which invisible things are proved (and we are convinced of their reality)*”. An additional note adds the aspect of being “*proven through testing*”. In other words the implication is that invisible things are validated based on an objective test that verifies their credibility. With this in mind, drawing on the previous examples, let’s identify the evidence in each case.

Noah was warned by God that the Lord was bringing a flood on the Earth to destroy all flesh (**Gen 6**). What wasn’t seen at that time was the flood that was to come. God gave instructions for Noah to build an ark that would preserve his family and save their lives. God’s warning Noah is the evidence that the event was going to happen. Their survival was also an element that wasn’t seen as well which was also contained in the warning from God. We’re told that Noah “*found grace in the eyes of the Lord*” (**Gen 6.8**). The warning itself, the word spoken by God, provided the evidence of that which was not yet seen, the flood and the families preservation.

Abraham was told he would have a son, that which was not seen, which promise was renewed by God at different points. The promise itself, spoken by God, stands as the evidence needed of that which was not seen. As I mentioned in the example of Noah, this also provided evidence of the existence of God as he was able to speak with Abraham and convey his directives. When God made his promises to Abraham, a son and the land to be possessed by his offspring were unseen in the future. The evidence supplied not only identified what was to be given to the patriarch, it supplied evidence for the existence of God. God was able to speak with Abraham confirming his existence but he wasn’t seen by the patriarch. Once more we see that the evidence exists in the promise of God and the effect or result of the promise was that which was not seen. The same holds true for the examples of Joseph and Moses. Noah hadn’t seen the flood but evidence of God’s existence was contained in the warning.

We’ve identified the word of God as a crucial element of faith. For the patriarchs it was verbal, spoken directly to the heads of households. Over time a transition takes place in which the written word supplements verbal direction provided through agents such as the prophets. In the last dispensation of time in which we live, God has provided the written word which stands as the **substance** of things hoped for, and the **evidence** of things not seen. Those who trusted in God’s word are described as having faith in God, and therefore his word. Their actions define them as faithful. In our time where does faith come from? How do we develop the faith that God wants us to have and how do we know we can trust it. That has to do with the origin of faith which we’ll discuss next.

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7. The origin of faith

The examples I've used so far are recognizable to most who are familiar with the Bible or stories from the Bible. We've arrived at a functional definition of faith as being based on the substance of promises made, which we identified as God's word. Secondly we identified the fact that God spoke these promises to the patriarchs, providing evidence for the existence of God, and the eventual fulfillment of the promises that were made. Turning our attention to the New Testament we have a definition of faith and functional examples of it in action as we read in Hebrews eleven. Paul provides us with additional statements about the nature of faith and its origin.

Paul states, "*So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*" (Rom 10.17). The idea of hearing as expressed here isn't referring to the perception of sound. The construction in this passage indicates that one is attending to the message that's being voiced. When one attends to, and understands the word of God, a result is the creation of faith. The word of God is therefore the foundation for faith, and true faith can't exist without it.

When we combine this with the functional definition of faith given in Hebrews eleven, we can further understand what it means to have faith in God. We can draw some conclusions about what faith is, and where it comes from.

- a. Faith is based on the word revealed by God
- b. God's word is found in revealed scripture
- c. One must develop a knowledge of the word to know what God has revealed
- d. The knowledge provided then must be accepted as fact
- e. Lack of knowledge of God's word is a lack of true faith
- f. God's word and faith are inseparable

There are some who claim to have faith in God, and may be very sincere, but if they lack an understanding of God's word, they're misguided by their lack of knowledge. This is an important point and we can go back to our examples in Hebrews to understand the relationship between God's word, faith and being faithful.

8. Faith and faithfulness

We have a functional definition of faith. We've examined the elements of faith as given in Hebrews, and we've identified the word of God as the basis for faith in God from Paul's letter to the Romans. Faith is one thing, but what does it mean to be faithful? We can answer that by looking at the examples in Hebrews.

Abel is referred to as having faith because he offered a more excellent sacrifice than Cain. In previous studies I've concluded that this was consistent with commands that God gave

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regarding sacrifices that were to be offered. Abel is therefore faithful because he did what God instructed him to do.

Enoch appears as an example but we have little information except that he pleased God. We find that “*Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him*” (Gen 5.24). We understand that to “*walk with God*” implies that Enoch followed God’s instructions. Doing so defined the faith that Enoch had, and his actions characterize him as faithful.

Abraham was told to go to a country the Lord would show him. Abraham He (delete) left his home and went to the place God spoke of where God repeated his promise that his offspring would return to that land in the future and possess it. When God spoke, Abraham trusted God and did that which he was told. His actions, in accordance with God’s word, define him as faithful.

We can apply this to all examples of the faithful. They received God’s word. They trusted in what they heard and then did what was required of them. The same is true for those who desire to have faith today and be recognized by God (delete) as faithful. We have to understand what God’s word is, we need to trust in the promises found in the word, and we need to follow what we find there. If we do this we’ll be acceptable in God’s sight and regarded as faithful just as those were whose lives we read about in the scriptures.

9. Conclusions about faith

Based on our study we can draw some conclusions about what faith is and how one is recognized as faithful in God’s sight.

- a. Faith is found in God’s word
- b. God’s word provides promises of things to come
- c. God’s word provides evidence for God & the (delete) fulfillment of his promises
- d. Faith begins with a knowledge of God’s word
- e. Faithfulness means acting in accordance with God’s word
- f. Faith and the word of God are inseparable
- g. The written word is the faith of God

10. Next

Now that we’ve defined what faith is and what it means to be faithful, we need to take a deeper look at the relationship between the revealed word and the quality of faithfulness. In the next lesson I’ll discuss **The All Or Nothing Principle** which further describes characteristics of what it means to be faithful to God and our attitude toward the revealed word.