

I was recently confronted by the dispensational view concerning the content of justifying faith of an Old Testament saint. It is my persuasion that this view fails to take into account the statement of various New Testament witnesses concerning the content of saving faith of the Old Testament saint. I am persuaded that Scripture demonstrates that the faith resulting in justification in the Old Testament saint was almost identical to that which the New Testament believer exercises today. In every dispensation, the object of saving faith was, and is, Christ: my suffering substitute.

The dispensational view of faith is stated below for reference from the Dallas Theological Seminary doctrinal statement:

We believe that it has always been true that “without faith it is impossible to please” God (Heb 11:6), and that the principle of faith was prevalent in the lives of all the Old Testament saints. However, we believe that it was historically impossible that they should have had as the conscious object of their faith the incarnate, crucified Son, the Lamb of God (John 1:29), and that it is evident that they did not comprehend as we do that the sacrifices depicted the person and work of Christ. We believe also that they did not understand the redemptive significance of the prophecies or types concerning the sufferings of Christ (1 Pet. 1:10-12); therefore, we believe that their faith toward God was manifested in other ways as is shown by the long record in Hebrews 11:1-40. We believe further that their faith thus manifested was counted unto them for righteousness (cf. Rom. 4:3 with Gen 15:6, Romans 4:5-8, Heb. 11:7).

The issue is this: What did the Old Testament saint believe was the reason he would one day stand just before God? What did the Old Testament saint believe would one day merit his righteousness before God? If we respond that he understood it was his faith, then faith becomes the object of faith. Faith in faith is a works gospel. The Old Testament saint could not have believed that an enduring faith (which is primarily the type of faith mentioned in Hebrews chapter 11), would one day justify him. If anyone today would say that he was eternally justified by such a faith, we would accuse that person of having faith in his own works.

As a side note, I would have a problem with viewing the faith of Hebrews chapter 11, as referenced in the above doctrinal statement, as speaking of

examples of saving faith. For starters, the faith spoken of in Hebrews 11 is a God-pleasing faith and a rewarded faith (verse 6). Likewise, in verse 26 of Hebrews 11, it is stated that the motive behind Moses' obedience in Egypt is that he looked for the reward. If it was this faith, which was to be one day rewarded, that was the basis of justification, then justification was based upon a meritorious faith.

.

We are not justified by a meritorious faith, neither are we justified because we possess a courageous or enduring faith. We are justified because we possess faith in a meritorious object, that objects being the finished work of Christ. The acts of faith recorded in Hebrews chapter 11 are responses to tests of faith, which would more appropriately fall under the category of rewards.

.

The entire chapter of Hebrews 11 serves as a basis for the exhortation of Hebrews 12:1.

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares *us*, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

Moreover, the final verses in Hebrews chapter 10, which introduce Hebrews chapter 11, likewise speak of an enduring faith, which is to be rewarded,

Hebrews 10:35 Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward.

From the above considerations, it is safe to assume that the examples of faith in Hebrews chapter 11 are not examples of justifying faith; rather, they are examples of enduring faith, faith which the Lord will one day reward.

Back to the original question: Did the Old Testament saints have a justifying faith comparable to ours today? The following verses indicate that Old Testament saints did have at their disposal the concept of a suffering Christ, and that they were looking for a Just One, who would suffer for their sins.

1 Corinthians 15:3: For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

The Scriptures of which the above verse is speaking are, in all likelihood, the Old Testament Scriptures. At the time of the writing of I Corinthians, (AD 56) the only other New Testament Scriptures, which would have been in existence, were some of Paul's other epistles, Matthew and the book of James. From the above passage, we can see that, indeed, the Old Testament Scriptures taught that Christ would die for our sins. The fact that many might have missed that truth does not negate the fact that it was taught.

Consider also the following passage:

Acts 3:18-21: "But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began."

According to this context, all the prophets spoke of a suffering Christ. By the way, who was that first prophet anyway? In the above and in the following contexts, the prophets were present on this earth, speaking the truth of God, since the world began.

Luke 11:50, 51: "that the blood of all the prophets which was shed from the foundation of the world may be required of this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who perished between the altar and the temple. Yes, I say to you, it shall be required of this generation."

If Abel was the first prophet, and all the prophets spoke of a suffering Christ, then apparently Abel was also proclaiming the merits of Christ, the suffering Substitute, the same Person the Lord told Abel's mother about in Genesis 3:15.

Here is another passage which demonstrates that the Old Testament saint believed basically the same thing we believe today:

Acts 17:2 And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures,³ Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ.

Apparently, the Apostle Paul thought the Old Testament contained the concept of the suffering Christ, because he drew upon those Scriptures in a way which persuaded his audience. Moreover, the Apostle Paul is speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; so it must be true that Old Testament saints were looking for the suffering Christ.

Acts 26:22, 23: "Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come -- that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the *Jewish* people and to the Gentiles."

Once again, Paul said that Moses and the prophets taught the concept of the suffering Christ.

Furthermore, Christ rebuked the Israelites for not understanding that He would suffer.

Luke 24:25-27: Then He said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.

How could the Lord Jesus rebuke these disciples for not understanding from the Scriptures that Christ would suffer for sins, if indeed that information did not exist in the Scriptures?

Luke 19:42: saying, "If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things *that make* for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.

In other words, the Israelites were condemned for not comprehending the peace-making work of Christ that Jesus was about to accomplish in their midst. This would presuppose they should have been expecting it. Consider also the following verse:

1 Peter 1:10, 11: Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace *that would come* to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.

According to the above context, the Spirit of Christ was bearing witness to the prophets of a suffering Christ. What the prophets were trying to figure out was not how, but when, the sufferings would occur. Notice it also says that the prophets considered this suffering of Christ the manifestation of God's grace.

John 8:56 "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw *it* and was glad."

We would have to conclude from this verse that Abraham looked forward to the coming Christ and was glad. About what was he glad?

Consider also the Holy Spirit utterance of Zacharias upon the naming of John the Baptist. The Holy Spirit in this passage also witnesses that the message of salvation has been proclaimed since the world began.

Luke 1:68-77: "Blessed *is* the Lord God of Israel,
For He has visited and accomplished redemption for (*literal translation*) His people,
And has raised up a horn of salvation for us
In the house of His servant David,
As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets,
Who *have been* since the world began,
That we should be saved from our enemies
And from the hand of all who hate us,
To perform the mercy *promised* to our fathers
And to remember His holy covenant,
The oath which He swore to our father Abraham:
To grant us that we,

Being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
Might serve Him without fear,
In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.
"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest;
For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,
To give knowledge of salvation to His people
By the remission of their sins,

Let's look at two parts of this Holy Spirit utterance of Zacharias.

1. Since the world began, the holy prophets had been speaking of a Horn of Salvation. A horn is a descendant. This means that the prophecy of the horn predates Moses by approximately 2600 years. Even before Moses had begun writing, the Prophets, who have been around since the world began, were speaking of this Horn of Salvation. So, this message predates the Law of Moses. Moreover, if the message predates Moses, then the subject matter of the "accomplished redemption" must be with reference to an issue which is as old as man. The only issue that could be is the issue of unredeemed sin.

2. This salvation was going to be in fulfillment of the mercy promised to the Fathers, which was promised to Abraham. According to this utterance, God promises Abraham mercy. So apparently, a component of Abraham's faith was the concept of mercy.

So we see that we have witness after New Testament witness that people of previous dispensations had the same core truths of the Gospel at their disposal that we believe. They, like we, looked to a cause and merit outside of themselves for assurance of their eternal well being. If their faith were not in the merits of Christ, their suffering Substitute, then what did they believe would merit an eternally right relationship with God?

In conclusion, I know it is improbable that very many people of previous dispensations understood and embraced the concept of a Divine suffering Substitute as that which would guarantee their eternal well being. The truth of that matter is, few people in world today, have discovered that truth. However, the issue is not how many people had believed in grace; but, rather, whether people of previous dispensations had grace information at their disposal. I would conclude, based upon the above study, that indeed they did.