

Faith can be a confusing thing. As God's children and as followers of Christ, we know we're supposed to have faith, but what does it mean? Where does it come from? How do I use it?

Perhaps you've been told to get faith or that you don't have enough of it. Maybe your favorite Hollywood celebrity or sports hero or musician reminds you to just have faith. Does that mean to hold onto hope, or to believe in yourself?

Some people say they have lost their faith. Once they believed in God, but then he did not help them in a time of great trouble. So, he must not exist.

When people who don't know God speak about faith, they tend to use one of two definitions. They speak about faith as in following a religion, such as the Christian faith or the faith of Islam or a general belief in spiritual things. Or they mean believing very hard in what they want to be true. Someone might say, things are tough, but I just have to have faith, meaning hope that better times will come or a problem will work itself out.

Although it can seem sometimes seem to make sense, the world's wisdom does not define truth. God's word in the Bible does. When the Bible speaks of faith, it does not mean hope, believing really hard in something, or a set of beliefs. Here is how the Bible defines faith.

Hebrews 11:1 - Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see.

Faith is not hope, it is reality. Faith is not belief in the unseen, it is belief in evidence. So, what is this evidence that defines everyone's reality? It's the word of God.

Let's start with an example. When I take my boy with me to run an errand, he often wants me to buy him a piece of candy. He knows I'm a good father, I love him, and that I often buy him a piece of candy. Can he now have faith that I will buy it for him? Can he demand it of me because it's his right to have one? Have I sinned against him if I don't provide the candy?

This is how we often treat God. We want something or even need it badly, so God must provide it or we'll stop trusting him or decide he was never real.

What if my other sons agree with the first one and declare that I'm a good father, that there is a real need for candy, and they humbly ask me for it. Does that change things? Do I have to provide the candy because three of them asked me for it?

The answer is no, of course. Are you a bad parent if you don't give your children everything they want or everything they truly believe they must have? I'm the father and my agenda is more important than my son's agenda. He may have already had enough candy. I might decide to bless him in some other way. I might be testing his patience or character. I might even intend to discipline him. All of these reasons take precedence.

There is however, one certain way my son can have faith that I will buy him a piece of candy. That is if I tell him I will buy it for him. This statement makes all the difference. Now, he has my word on it.

Faith is not hoping very hard. It's not declaring what we want to be true. Faith is hearing, believing, and acting on what God says.

Hearing from God

Everyone speaks to God. Even those who hate him find themselves calling on God during times of great trouble. God's law is written on every man's heart, and it's instinctive to us to call on him when we cannot help ourselves. However, if you claim that God speaks to you, then the tables can quickly turn. Now, you've become a crazy person. Are you hearing strange voices? Do the voices tell you to do bad things?

The reason people don't believe God speaks, is because they never hear from him. Sadly, this even applies to many Christians. For them, it might bring up uncomfortable thoughts of evil people claiming God told them to do some wicked thing. And after all, we have the Bible now, and that's all we need to know what God wants.

But God is not a distant God. He's a God here and now and totally interested and involved in our lives, whether we want him to or not. If he's talking to us, it's in our best interest to listen. So, how does God talk to us?

God speaks primarily through his word, the Bible. For most everything in our life, he's already left a perfect record of his will. I don't have to ask him if I should praise his name, or if I need to be a part of a church, or if I must forgive, or if I should love my neighbor. He's already answered those questions, which is why he tells us to read and obey and meditate on his word.

Joshua 1:8 - Study this Book of Instruction continually. Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in all you do.

When we do what God tells us to do in his word, that is not only obedience, it is faith. We're hearing him speak, we believe what he says in his word, and we act on it.

How else might God speak? Many Christians believe God speaks only through his word. If this were the case, though, how would a pastor know God is calling him to be a pastor? His name isn't in the Bible. God speaks about healing people in the Bible – so I know he can - but he doesn't speak about my cancer. If God does not speak to us personally, then he's a distant god. He did not wind up the world like a toy, give his instructions, and then watch us spin from afar. This contradicts his word. And God never contradicts his word. God's word shows him speaking to his children, encouraging obedience, and working in their lives through his Holy Spirit.

In the book of John, Jesus speaks about the Holy Spirit.

John 16:13 - When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own but will tell you what he has heard. He will tell you about the future. He will bring me glory by telling you whatever he receives from me. All that belongs to the Father is mine; this is why I said, 'The Spirit will tell you whatever he receives from me.'

So, God speaks to us through the Holy Spirit who lives in us. Or he may speak to us through the Holy Spirit who also lives in another believer.

Hearing God speak takes time and experience. He rarely arrives with thunder and lightning and a Thus Sayeth the Lord proclamation. He is certainly capable of that, has done so in the past, and will do so again in the future. But to his children, he usually speaks in a small voice inside our hearts, a voice that never contradicts his written word. It's our responsibility to be quiet and learn to hear that voice.

After we hear from God, we have the opportunity to believe him.

Believing God

Young people who love God often zealously declare that if God would only speak to them and tell them what to do, then they would obey him no matter what the cost. This is a wonderful attitude! God bless them. But what they frequently miss is that the road to obedience to God is paved with the dying to self. Dying is hard and messy and unpleasant, and people are not very good at denying self. Consider an overweight man zealously declaring he has started a new diet to lose weight. In his mind, he sees a fool-proof plan to follow. The pounds will drop away and muscles will pop out everywhere on his body. What he's not focusing on so much is the repeated, daily effort it is going to take: denying the pleasure of food, exercising, and patience with a process that takes a long time.

God works through his people, but he does not allow us to do things our way and for our glory. So when he wants to work, he often has to get us out of the way first. After God spoke to Gideon, he whittled down the army to 300 soldiers so they would not claim the victory as theirs. After God saved Israel from Egypt, he sent them into the wilderness for 40 years so they would be obedient to his exact instructions. After God showed Peter his true heart, which was to deny Christ before men, he could then use Peter to boldly and fearlessly proclaim his Lord before thousands.

Believing God does not come naturally or easily to mankind. Doubt comes naturally and easily. After we hear from God, we then get the opportunity to

believe him. It's all flowers and rainbows, until God tells us to love an enemy bent on harming us, or to give something we need to someone else instead, or to trust him with peace when the doctor uses the word terminal. Are we going to listen for God's voice then and believe what he says, even if we don't see how things can work out? God puts us to the test in his word.

James 1:2-4 - Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

Romans 8:28 - And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.

When troubles come, have joy. Believe that what God allows in your life is good for you. This is what God already says in his word, and we must believe it is true. God is not a liar; he's the only one who always speaks the truth.

More difficult, though, is hearing God speak to us through his spirit or through another believer. Do we recognize his voice? Some might argue this is a recipe for disaster. After all, Satan the deceiver speaks to us, too. That is correct, but it does not relieve of us from our responsibility to listen for God's voice and to learn to recognize it. We can ask ourselves; does what we hear in our spirit agree with or contradict the Bible?

What if I feel an urge to pray for a brother in need in the early morning hours? Is that God speaking to me? Is it Satan? Is it my own mind speaking to me? One thing I can be sure of is that my flesh will automatically be inclined to disbelieve God is speaking because it wants to roll over and go back to sleep. Does this urge to pray for my brother contradict God's word? No. The Bible tells us to pray for each other and to lift up our brother's burdens to him. There is no sin there. It may be God speaking in my spirit.

Faith begins with hearing God speak and believing what he says is true. But action brings it into completion.

Acting on What God Says

God sometimes gives me tasks or directions. It's a wonderful experience to hear God speak in your spirit. It brings a sense of peace and love that the thoughts of the God of the universe are intent on me. But I often find that God tends tells me to do things that I don't want to do, things that contradict my own will and pleasure. As an example, I never have to tell my children to relax or to be sure to eat a delicious meal or to spend more time playing. I know they already intend to do exactly that. But I have to constantly remind them to follow those instructions they don't want to pay attention to, such as practicing good manners, completing their chores, or going to bed on time.

As a father, I love my son always and unconditionally. And, I would be happy if he always listened to me and whole heartedly agreed with my instructions. But what if he never actually did what I instructed him to do? Would I be pleased then?

Faith always involves action, even if the action is simply to believe and trust what God says is true. If I hear the Father's urge to pray for my brother, what good is it if I thank him for speaking to me and assure him that I believe what he says is true and good, but then never actually pray for my brother? Christians tend to focus strongly on belief, but not so much action. Taking action messes with our personal agendas. It leads us out of our comfort zone and usually requires us sacrifice our time, attention, or resources. Consider what Hebrews says about faith.

Hebrews 11:6 - And it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him.

We must exercise faith to please God. Notice that action is tied up with belief. We must believe he exists and rewards and we must come to him and seek him. These are actions that take effort. What are the actions required to come to him and seek? They are thinking on him, meditating on his word, putting aside time

for prayer, perhaps fasting. We can find those who know the Lord and get their counsel. We can immerse ourselves in his church and its work.

Consider these words by God.

Matthew 3: 16-17 - After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy."

And then, consider these words by Jesus.

John 6:38 - For I have come down from heaven to do the will of God who sent me, not to do my own will.

Hearing, believing, and acting on God's word is exactly what Jesus did during his ministry. He was obedient to everything his father told him to do, even to laying down his own life. And all of his actions pleased God.

This is how we practice faith. Not believing really hard in what we want to happen, but hearing what God wants, believing that, and acting on it. This enables us to work in God's kingdom and please the Father, just as Jesus did.

- Bill Wilson (This article may be copied freely.)