

WHAT IS “THE FAITH”?

I. DEFINING FAITH GENERALLY

A. The general definition of faith in the Western world is “irrational belief”. It is said that faith is believing something to be true in spite of all sorts of evidence to the contrary. Even Webster’s dictionary says that faith is a “*firm belief in something for which there is no proof*”.

B. Hebrews 11:1 defines the word “faith” in a very different way:

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1 ESV)

C. Biblical faith is not irrational belief or a baseless hope in something unproven. Rather, faith is *conviction and assurance* about certain things that we hope for but can’t yet see. That conviction and assurance we can have as Christians is not because we are crazy, but because we actually *believe the One making the promises*.

D. The apostles’ faith was based on *evidence of promises that had been fulfilled*. This led them to deep confidence and assurance that God was powerful and trustworthy, able to bring to pass the rest of the promises He had not yet fulfilled.

“Of this man’s offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised.” (Acts 13:23 ESV)

“And we bring you the good news [“gospel”] that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm, “ ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you.’ ” (Acts 13:32–33 ESV)

“For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, “Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name... And again Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope.” May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.” (Romans 15:12–13 ESV)

II. UNDERSTANDING BIBLICAL FAITH

A. To have *faith in Jesus* means that, because of what God has demonstrated through Him, we can have *certainty* and *assurance* of God bringing to pass His promises that have yet to be fulfilled. The promises the Bible gives (and thus our assurance of them) are not arbitrary, ambiguous, or unclear.

“We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty... And we have the word of

the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises...” (2 Peter 1:16–20 NIV)

- B. Since the days of the apostles of Jesus and the early church, the promises given through the Law, the Prophets, and Jesus Himself have been severely distorted, confused, or abandoned. As “sent eyewitnesses” of Jesus, the apostles were deeply committed to *preserving* and *proclaiming* the truth of *what God has already done and what God will do in the future*.

“Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” (Jude 3 ESV)

“Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.” (Colossians 2:6–8 ESV)

- C. There is one *faith* that unifies believers. The Scriptures call this story and set of promises *the gospel*. The apostles understood from Jesus Himself that “ravenous wolves” would distort the gospel and use its promises for every type of selfish gain. They often wrote about “fierce wolves” (Acts 20:29) and “false teachers” who would alter the truth and “secretly bring in destructive heresies” (2 Peter 2:1) as they gave themselves to “doctrines of demons” (1 Timothy 4:1).

“There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” (Ephesians 4:4–6 ESV)

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” (Matthew 7:15 ESV)

“I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” (Acts 20:29–32 ESV)

- D. If the “faith of the gospel” (Philippians 1:27) is the unifying agent that brings believers together, we must ensure with all diligence that the “apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42) is what shapes our beliefs and our hope.

“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,” (Philippians 1:27 ESV)

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed." (Galatians 1:6–9 ESV)

III. THE APOSTLES' FAITH IS ISRAELOCENTRIC

- A. In our modern Western Christian context, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that Jesus and the apostles were *Jewish*, and their faith and hope was firmly rooted in and oriented around the Law and the Prophets.
- B. In fact, the word “gospel” (or “good news” / “glad tidings”) was not invented by Jesus or the apostles. It is found often in the Old Testament and referred to the good news brought to Israel, Judah, and Jerusalem regarding the promises and hope God gave them through the covenants (Isaiah 40:1-31; Isaiah 52:1-10; Isaiah 60; Isaiah 61:1-22; Nahum 1:5; 1 Chronicles 16:23-36; Psalm 96:2).
- C. Israel, as God's “firstborn” nation (Exodus 4:22), would inherit a very specific plot of land in the Middle East (Genesis 15:18-20) and become a “holy nation” of priests (Exodus 19:6) to God. Through this, all of the other nations would be “blessed” (Genesis 12:3) as Israel's king ruled over the earth from Jerusalem.
- D. The Law and the Prophets declare that these promises would not come to pass until Israel passed through a time of severe testing, chastisement, and “trouble” in the latter days (Jeremiah 30:7). God would deliver them from the wicked hand of the nations and dwell in their midst forevermore.
- E. Thus the *gospel* is “first” (Romans 1:16; 2:9-10) a message to Israel and Jerusalem as a “comfort” (Isaiah 40:1) in their last days trouble. The comforting message is that God would indeed be faithful to His covenantal promises, just as He had always been faithful. When the apostles used the word “gospel” and connected it to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, they were explicitly declaring an Israelocentric message and hope.
- F. Our *assurance of things hoped for and conviction of things not yet seen* as Gentiles is completely based on God's continuing covenantal faithfulness with national Israel and the Jewish people. Apart from God being faithful to Abraham, Moses, David, and the whole house of Israel in the New Covenant, the rest of the nations will not be *blessed* as God has intended and promised.

"For if their [Israel's] rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?" (Romans 11:15 ESV)

- G. Has God abandoned, reworked, or redefined His promises to national Israel because of their rejection of the Messiah and disobedience to the covenant? As the apostle says so clearly: “by no means!”

"I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin... So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous... Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in... For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." (Romans 11:1,11,25,29 ESV)

IV. THE APOSTLES' FAITH IS APOCALYPTIC

- A. An Israelocentric faith is also a future-focused, *apocalyptic* faith. Not only do we anticipate a future fulfillment of God's covenantal promises, the Scriptures anticipate a climactic, cataclysmic conclusion to this age when He does so. The Scriptures call this *the day of the LORD* (Isaiah 13:6,9; Ezekiel 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11; 3:14; Amos 5:18; Obadiah 1:15; Zephaniah 1:7,14; Zechariah 14:1; Malachi 4:5; Acts 2:20; 1 Corinthians 5:5; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:2; 2 Peter 3:10). This future Day will bring low the pride, sin, and rebellion of man that began in the garden-sanctuary in Eden.
- B. The all-consuming nature of the Day of the LORD is developed in the Law and the Prophets and subsequently echoed by Jesus and the apostles. That day will be:
1. Like a raging storm (Matthew 7:27; Luke 6:48)
 2. Like the days of Noah (Matthew 24:37 Luke 17:26ff; 2 Peter 3:6ff)
 3. Like fire and sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah (Luke 17:28ff; 2 Peter 2:6)
 4. Like lightning across the sky (Matthew 24:27; Luke 17:24)
 5. Like a thief breaking into a house in the middle of the night (Matthew 24:43; 1 Thessalonians 5:2ff; 2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 3:3; Revelation 16:15)
 6. Like a woman in sudden labor pains (Matthew 24:8; Mark 13:8)
- C. The language of sudden calamity given in the Scriptures is *very purposeful*:
1. It shocks the heart like a jolt of electricity from a defibrillator to awaken from the "daze of drunkenness" that sin and unrighteousness bring upon humanity in this present evil age.

"But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap." (Luke 21:34 ESV)
 2. It reminds us that the strength of man cannot and will not bring about God's promises. Movements throughout history have sought to establish God's promises through military might, intellectualism, prayer, or piety. An emphasis on the contribution of man to the day of the LORD actually *weakens* faith in God's ability to bring about His promises, as if He needed our help or is somehow dependent upon humanity. An apocalyptic gospel guards against any collaboration of God's power with human pride, strength, and knowledge.

"And the haughtiness of man shall be humbled, and the lofty pride of men shall be brought low, and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day." (Isaiah 2:17 ESV)

"Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it. I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant, and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless." (Isaiah 13:9, 11 ESV)

"Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead." (2 Corinthians 1:9 ESV)

V. THE APOSTLES' FAITH HAS ONE TRAJECTORY

- A. An Israelocentric, apocalyptic faith is also *oriented in one direction* - toward the time that the Scriptures often refer to as "the age to come" (Matthew 12:32; Mark 10:30; Luke 18:30; Hebrews 6:5). The apostles' expectation and hope lied *completely* in Jesus' return to initiate the Day of the LORD, grant immortality and eternal life to the righteous, and fulfill His covenantal promises. They pressed towards this goal with perseverance and patience.
- B. At the end of this age (Matthew 24:3; Matthew 28:20), God will punish evildoers with eternal destruction (2 Thessalonians 1:8-10) and re-establish the heavens and the earth as a home of righteousness (2 Peter 3:13). In contrast to this present evil age, the age to come will be characterized by life, peace, prosperity, and righteous governance.
- C. The Scriptures present the goal (Philippians 3:14; 1 Corinthians 9:24; Hebrews 12:1) or "finish line" of the race of faith as the return of Jesus to raise the dead, punish the wicked, establish a Jerusalem-based Messianic kingdom, and to restore all things in the heavens and the earth to their original glory. Christian movements in history and modernity have altered this trajectory in various ways either by adjusting the direction of the race (*heavenward instead of earthward*) or the race clock (the age to come has arrived in one degree or another), thus altering the apostolic *mission*.

"But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some." (2 Timothy 2:16-18 ESV)

"...But take heed to yourselves; for they will deliver you up to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations." The task of the Church in relation to the events of world history is not to be the governor or controller of them, but to be the suffering servant and witness of the Lord, manifesting in its witness the true meaning of these events. The Church is not the instrument of God's governance of the world, but the witness of his governance both by speaking and by suffering." (Newbigin, Lesslie. *Trinitarian Faith and Today's Mission*, p. 41-42)

- D. The apostles taught their churches to live as witnesses of the coming age, carrying their heart as patient sojourners, pilgrims, and strangers in this present evil age. Their hope would not be seen *now* (in this present age), it would come *then* (in the age to come).

“Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.” (1 Peter 2:11 ESV)

“For in this hope [the hope of a bodily resurrection] we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” (Romans 8:24–25 ESV)

VI. THE APOSTLES’ FAITH HAS ONE ANCHOR

- A. For the apostles, the *conviction* and *assurance* of salvation from God’s wrath and participation in God’s covenantal promises came through belief in the sacrificial death of their promised Messiah on the cross. This was the sole *anchor* of their faith.
- B. The question of how sinful man can escape *wrath, judgment and recompense* and be reconciled to God was first answered through the Law given to Israel through Moses. Through obedience to God’s commands and by setting forth a sin-bearing sacrificial system for the disobedient to *atone* for sin, the Law held out a means by which Israel could become righteous, thus inheriting the promises God made to Abraham and bringing *blessing* to the rest of the nations of the earth.
- C. However, Israel did not *want* to keep the Law because of their depraved hearts (Psalm 78:10-11). In fact, both Jew and Gentile alike are depraved, “by nature children of wrath” (Ephesians 2:3), “sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2; cf. Romans 11:32), and “sinners” (Romans 5:19; Galatians 2:17; 1 Timothy 1:15). Reconciliation with God could not come through the Law that was “weakened by the flesh” (Romans 8:3), so:

“For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,” (Romans 8:3 ESV)

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16 ESV)

- D. Humanity seeks reconciliation with God in many ways. Yet God has identified that the only way both Jew and Gentile alike can be forgiven of their sin and reconciled to God by *faith in the sacrificial death of the promised Davidic king*, Jesus the Messiah. Thus to have *faith in Jesus* is to *trust and have confidence in God’s sin-bearing arrangement that reconciles us back to Him*. This is a stumbling block and a seemingly foolish truth, yet it is what God has chosen to humble the pride of men.

“but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.” (Romans 5:8–10 ESV)

“For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.” (1 Timothy 2:5–6 ESV)

“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,” (1 Corinthians 1:18, 21–23 ESV)

- E. Under this arrangement, righteousness is *reckoned* or *credited* to us just as it was credited to Jews through the Law’s sacrificial system. However, it is not the blood of a bull or a goat that merits us - Jesus’ sacrificial blood establishes us as *righteous* in the sight of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). In light of the Day of the LORD, the King of Israel’s self-sacrifice accomplishes righteousness in three ways: *propitiation*, *justification*, and *redemption*. God put forward His son in our place and on our behalf to satisfy the wrath, judgment, and retribution of God, that those of *faith* might find *reconciliation* with the Holy One (Romans 5:10; 2 Corinthians 5:18ff; Colossians 1:20ff).

“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.” (Romans 3:21–25 ESV)

1. *Propitiation* is the appeasement of *wrath/anger* (Romans 3:25; 1 John 2:2; 4:10)
2. *Justification* is the acquittal of *judgment* (Romans 3:20ff; 5:1ff; Galatians 2:16ff)
3. *Redemption* is the *payment* of debt (Romans 3:24; Ephesians 1:7; Hebrews 9:12).

- F. When we truly believe these things and cast ourselves at the cross by *faith*, we are “*declared righteous*” (cf. Romans 2:13; 3:20) in God’s sight, and thus we confidently trust that we will be *saved* from the wrath of God on the Day of the LORD. We can go on to eagerly anticipate of the return of Jesus to *give us eternal life and restore all things*, just as God has promised (Acts 3:19-21).

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith [‘justified by His blood’, vs. 9], we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Him we have also obtained access by faith

into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God [‘the glory that is to be revealed to us’, Rom. 8:18]... Having now been justified by His blood [looking back to the cross], we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him [looking forward to His Day].” (Romans 5:1-9)

“That I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith... and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.” (Philippians 3:8-11 NIV)

“Because of his grace he declared us righteous and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life.” (Titus 3:7 NIV)

So Christ was sacrificed once to take away (‘bear’, NASB) the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. (Hebrews 9:28 NIV)

“Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.” (2 Timothy 4:8 ESV)

- G. In summary, based on our *faith* in Christ crucified, God includes any of us (both Jew and Gentile) in the benefits of the “Abrahamic blessing” that is finally and ultimately realized in the future “New Covenant” with the house of Israel. Today we can look upon the cross and the empty tomb of Israel’s Messiah and agree (by repentance and faith) in its testimony regarding our complete utter depravity, receive the atonement provided in His Son, and put our faith in the future resurrection from the dead. God “seals us” to the day of the resurrection of the righteous by giving us His “firstfruits Spirit” today, guaranteeing our inclusion and participation in His kingdom on the future day when the Messiah returns to rule from Jerusalem and God pours out His Spirit upon all of national Israel.

VII. OUR RESPONSE

“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 15:4–6 ESV)

- A. Devote yourself (and family, friends, church community) to the apostles’ teaching.

“And with many other words he [Peter] bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” (Acts 2:40–42 ESV)

"For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach... He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach. One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth." (Titus 1:7–14 ESV)

"They [church leaders] must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience." (1 Timothy 3:9 ESV)

B. Set our hope fully on the day of Jesus' coming.

"Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 1:13 ESV)

"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ," (Titus 2:11–13 ESV)

C. Endure suffering for the faith.

"strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." (Acts 14:22 ESV)

"For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." (2 Corinthians 4:17–18 ESV)

"Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong." (1 Corinthians 16:13 ESV)

"Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world." (1 Peter 5:9 ESV)

"For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised." (Hebrews 10:36 ESV)

"And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life." (1 John 2:25 ESV)

D. Take up the shield of faith.

"In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming

darts of the evil one;" (Ephesians 6:16 ESV)

"And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister." (Colossians 1:21–23 ESV)

"Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses." (1 Timothy 6:12 ESV)

"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful." (Hebrews 10:23 ESV)

- E. Live as a faithful witness of the cross, the resurrection, the coming kingdom, and the Day of the LORD.

"So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.'" (Acts 1:6–8 ESV)

"As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all)... They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'" (Acts 10:36–43 ESV)

"Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God." (2 Corinthians 7:1 ESV)

"But we urge you, brothers, to do this [love one another] more and more, and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one." (1 Thessalonians 4:10–12 ESV)