

The Biblical Conception of Faith

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By means of the providentially mediated diversity of emphasis of the New Testament writers on the several aspects of faith, the outlines of the biblical conception of faith are thrown into very high relief.

Of its *subjective nature* we have what is almost a formal definition in the description of it as an ‘assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen’ (Heb. 11:1). It obviously contains in it, therefore, an element of knowledge (Heb. 11:6), and it as obviously issues in conduct (Heb. 11:8, cf. 5:9, 1 Pet. 1:22). But it consists neither in assent nor in obedience, but in a reliant trust in the invisible Author of all good (Heb. 11:27), in which the mind is set upon the things that are above and not on the things that are upon the earth (Col. 3:2, cf. 2 Cor. 4:16–18, Mt. 6:25. The examples cited in Heb. 11 are themselves enough to show that the faith there commended is not a mere belief in God’s existence and justice and goodness, or crediting of His word and promises, but a practical counting of Him faithful (11:11), with a trust so profound that no trial can shake it (11:35), and so absolute that it survives the loss of even its own pledge (11:17). So little is faith in its biblical conception merely a conviction of the understanding, that, when that is called faith, the true idea of faith needs to be built up above this word (Jas. 2:14 ff.). It is a movement of the whole inner man (Rom. 10:9, 10), and is set in contrast with an unbelief that is akin, not to ignorance but to disobedience (Heb. 3:18, 19, Jn. 3:36, Rom. 11:20, 30, 15:31, 1 Thess. 1:8, Heb. 4:2, 6, 1 Pet. 1:7, 8, 3:1, 20, 4:18, Acts 14:2, 19:9), and that grows out of, not lack of information, but that aversion of the heart from God (Heb. 3:12) which takes pleasure in unrighteousness (2 Thess. 2:12), and is so unsparingly exposed by our Lord (Jn. 3:19, 5:44, 8:47, 10:26). In the breadth of its idea, it is thus the going out of the heart from itself and its resting on God in confident trust for all good. But the scriptural revelation has to do with, and is directed to the needs of, not man in the abstract, but sinful man; and for sinful man this hearty reliance on God necessarily becomes humble trust in Him for the fundamental need of the sinner—forgiveness of sins and reception into favour. In response to the revelations of His grace and the provisions of His mercy, it commits itself without reserve and with abnegation of all self-dependence, to Him as its sole and sufficient Saviour, and thus, in one act, empties itself of all claim on God and casts itself upon His grace alone for salvation.

It is, accordingly, solely from its *object* that faith derives its value. This object is uniformly the God of grace, whether conceived of broadly as the source of all life, light, and blessing, on whom man in his creaturely weakness is entirely dependent, or, whenever sin and the eternal welfare of the soul are in view, as the Author of salvation in whom alone the hope of unworthy man can be placed. This one object of saving faith never varies from the beginning to the end of the scriptural revelation; though, naturally, there is an immense difference between its earlier and later stages in fulness of knowledge as to the nature of the redemptive work by which the salvation intrusted to God shall be accomplished; and as naturally there occurs a very great variety of forms of statement in which trust in the God of salvation receives expression. Already, however, at the gate of Eden, the God in whom the trust of our first parents is reposed is the God of the gracious promise of the retrieval of the injury inflicted by the serpent; and from that beginning of knowledge the progress is steady, until, what is implied in the primal promise having become express in the accomplished work of redemption, the trust of sinners is explicitly placed in the God who was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself (2 Cor. 5:19). Such a faith, again, could not fail to embrace with humble confidence all the gracious promises of the

God of salvation, from which indeed it draws its life and strength; nor could it fail to lay hold with strong conviction on all those revealed truths concerning Him which constitute, indeed, in the varied circumstances in which it has been called upon to persist throughout the ages, the very grounds in view of which it has been able to rest upon Him with steadfast trust. These truths, in which the 'Gospel' or glad-tidings to God's people has been from time to time embodied, run all the way from such simple facts as that it was the very God of their fathers that had appeared unto Moses for their deliverance (Ex. 4:5), to such stupendous facts, lying at the root of the very work of salvation itself, as that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God sent of God to save the world (Jn. 6:69, 8:24, 11:42, 13:19, 16:27, 30, 17:8, 21, 20:31, 1 Jn. 5:15), that God has raised Him from the dead (Rom. 10:9, 1 Thess. 4:14), and that as His children we shall live with Him (Rom. 6:8). But in believing this variously presented Gospel, faith has ever terminated with trustful reliance, not on the promise but on the Promiser,—not on the propositions which declare God's grace and willingness to save, or Christ's divine nature and power, or the reality and perfection of His saving work, but on the Saviour upon whom, because of these great facts, it could securely rest as on One able to save to the uttermost. Jesus Christ, God the Redeemer, is accordingly the one object of saving faith, presented to its embrace at first implicitly and in promise, and ever more and more openly until at last it is entirely explicit and we read that 'a man is not justified save through faith in Jesus Christ' (Gal. 2:16). If, with even greater explicitness still, faith is sometimes said to rest upon some element in the saving work of Christ, as, for example, upon His blood or His righteousness (Rom. 3:25, 2 Pet. 1:1), obviously such a singling out of the very thing in His work on which faith takes hold, in no way derogates from its repose upon Him, and Him only, as the sole and sufficient Saviour.

The *saving power* of faith resides thus not in itself, but in the Almighty Saviour on whom it rests. It is never on account of its formal nature as a psychic act that faith is conceived in Scripture to be saving,—as if this frame of mind or attitude of heart were itself a virtue with claims on God for reward, or at least especially pleasing to Him (either in its nature or as an act of obedience) and thus predisposing Him to favour, or as if it brought the soul into an attitude of receptivity or of sympathy with God, or opened a channel of communication from Him. It is not faith that saves, but faith in Jesus Christ: faith in any other saviour, or in this or that philosophy or human conceit (Col. 2:16, 18, 1 Tim. 4:1), or in any other gospel than that of Jesus Christ and Him as crucified (Gal. 1:8, 9), brings not salvation but a curse. It is not, strictly speaking, even faith in Christ that saves, but Christ that saves through faith. The saving power resides exclusively, not in the act of faith or the attitude of faith or the nature of faith, but in the object of faith; and in this the whole biblical representation centres, so that we could not more radically misconceive it than by transferring to faith even the smallest fraction of that saving energy which is attributed in the Scriptures solely to Christ Himself. This purely mediatory function of faith is very clearly indicated in the regimens in which it stands, which ordinarily express simple instrumentality. It is most frequently joined to its verb as the dative of means or instrument (Acts 15:9, 26:18, Rom. 3:28, 4:20, 5:2, 11:20, 2 Cor. 1:24, Heb. 11:3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 17, 20, 21, 23, 24 || 27, 28, 29, 30, 31); and the relationship intended is further explained by the use to express it of the prepositions ἐκ (Rom. 1:17, 17, 3:26, 30, 4:16, 16, 5:1, 9:30, 32, 10:6, 14:23, 23, Gal. 2:16, 3:7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 27, 28, 5:5, 1 Tim. 1:5, Heb. 10:38, Jas. 2:24) and διὰ (with the genitive, never with the accusative, Rom. 3:22, 25, 30, 2 Cor. 5:7, Gal. 2:16, 3:14, 26, 2 Tim. 3:15, Heb. 6:12, 11:33, 39, 1 Pet. 1:5),—the fundamental idea of the former construction being that of source or origin, and of the latter that of mediation or instrumentality, though they are used together in the same context, apparently with no distinction of meaning (Rom. 3:25, 26, 30, Gal.

2:16). It is not necessary to discover an essentially different implication in the exceptional usage of the prepositions ἐπί (Acts 3:16, Phil. 3:9) and κατά (Heb. 11:7, 13, cf. Mt. 9:29) in this connexion: ἐπί is apparently to be taken in a quasi-temporal sense, 'on faith,' giving the occasion of the divine act, and κατά very similarly in the sense of conformability, 'in conformity with faith.' Not infrequently we meet also with a construction with the preposition ἐν which properly designates the sphere, but which in passages like Gal. 2:20, Col. 2:7, 2 Thess. 2:13 appears to pass over into the conception of instrumentality.

So little indeed is faith conceived as containing in itself the energy or ground of salvation, that it is consistently represented as, in its *origin*, itself a gratuity from God in the prosecution of His saving work. It comes, not of one's own strength or virtue, but only to those who are chosen of God for its reception (2 Thess. 2:13), and hence is His gift (Eph. 6:23, cf. 2:8, 9, Phil. 1:29), through Christ (Acts 3:16, Phil. 1:29, 1 Pet. 1:21, cf. Heb. 12:2), by the Spirit (2 Cor. 4:13, Gal. 5:5), by means of the preached word (Rom. 10:17, Gal. 3:2, 5); and as it is thus obtained from God (2 Pet. 1:1, Jude 3, 1 Pet. 1:21), thanks are to be returned to God for it (Col. 1:4, 2 Thess. 1:3). Thus, even here all boasting is excluded, and salvation is conceived in all its elements as the pure product of unalloyed grace, issuing not from, but in, good works (Eph. 2:8–12). The place of faith in the process of salvation, as biblically conceived, could scarcely, therefore, be better described than by the use of the scholastic term 'instrumental cause.' Not in one portion of the Scriptures alone, but throughout their whole extent, it is conceived as a boon from above which comes to men, no doubt through the channels of their own activities, but not as if it were an effect of their energies, but rather, as it has been finely phrased, as a gift which God lays in the lap of the soul. 'With the heart,' indeed, 'man believeth unto righteousness'; but this believing does not arise of itself out of any heart indifferently, nor is it grounded in the heart's own potencies; it is grounded rather in the freely-giving goodness of God, and comes to man as a benefaction out of heaven.

The *effects* of faith, not being the immediate product of faith itself but of that energy of God which was exhibited in raising Jesus from the dead and on which dependence is now placed for raising us with Him into newness of life (Col. 2:12), would seem to depend directly only on the fact of faith, leaving questions of its strength, quality, and the like more or less to one side. We find a proportion, indeed, suggested between faith and its effects (Mt. 9:29, 8:13, cf. 8:10, 15:28, 17:20, Lk. 7:9, 17:6). Certainly there is a fatal doubt, which vitiates with its double-mindedness every approach to God (Jas. 1:6–8, cf. 4:8, Mt. 21:21, Mk. 11:23, Rom. 4:20, 14:23, Jude 22). But Jesus deals with notable tenderness with those of 'little faith,' and His apostles imitated Him in this (Mt. 6:30 f., 20, 14:31, 16:8, 17:20, Lk. 12:28, Mk. 9:24, Lk. 17:5, cf. Rom. 14:1, 2, 1 Cor. 8:7, and see DOUBT). The effects of faith may possibly vary also with the end for which the trust is exercised (cf. Mk. 10:51 ἵνα ἀναβλέψω with Gal. 2:16 ἐπιστεύσαμεν ἵνα δικαιωθῶμεν). But he who humbly but confidently casts himself on the God of salvation has the assurance that he shall not be put to shame (Rom. 11:11, 9:33), but shall receive the end of his faith, even the salvation of his soul (1 Pet. 1:9). This salvation is no doubt, in its idea, received all at once (Jn. 3:36, 1 Jn. 5:12); but it is in its very nature a process, and its stages come, each in its order. First of all, the believer, renouncing by the very act of faith his own righteousness which is out of the law, receives that 'righteousness which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God on faith' (Phil. 3:9, cf. Rom. 3:22, 4:11, 9:30, 10:3, 10, 2 Cor. 5:21, Gal. 5:5, Heb. 11:7, 2 Pet. 1:1). On the ground of this righteousness, which in its origin is the 'righteous act' of Christ, constituted by His 'obedience' (Rom. 5:18, 19), and comes to the believer as a 'gift' (Rom. 5:17), being reckoned to him apart from works (Rom. 4:6), he that believes in Christ is justified

in God's sight, received into His favour, and made the recipient of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 7:39, cf. Acts 5:32), by whose indwelling men are constituted the sons of God (Rom. 8:13). And if children, then are they heirs (Rom. 8:17), assured of an incorruptible, undefiled, and unfading inheritance, reserved in heaven for them; and meanwhile they are guarded by the power of God through faith unto this gloriously complete salvation (1 Pet. 1:4, 5). Thus, though the immediate effect of faith is only to make the believer possessor before the judgment-seat of God of the alien righteousness wrought out by Christ, through this one effect it draws in its train the whole series of saving acts of God, and of saving effects on the soul. Being justified by faith, the enmity which has existed between the sinner and God has been abolished, and he has been introduced into the very family of God, and made sharer in all the blessings of His house (Eph. 2:13 f.). Being justified by faith, he has peace with God, and rejoices in the hope of the glory of God, and is enabled to meet the trials of life, not merely with patience but with joy (Rom. 5:1 f.). Being justified by faith, he has already working within him the life which the Son has brought into the world, and by which, through the operations of the Spirit which those who believe in Him receive (Jn. 7:39), he is enabled to overcome the world lying in the evil one, and, kept by God from the evil one, to sin not (1 Jn. 5:19). In a word, because we are justified by faith, we are, through faith, endowed with all the privileges and supplied with all the graces of the children of God.

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