

## Faith and Prayer

Commentary for November 15, 2019 — By Dr. Ernest L. Martin, Ph.D., March 1976

The one Christian virtue that outweighs all others (with the exception of love) is faith. So important is the subject that salvation itself is founded on it (Ephesians 2:8). But strange as it may seem, the matter of faith is one of the most illusory and misunderstood teachings of the Bible, even by Christians.

In the New Testament there is an avalanche of references to faith, but some may be startled to learn that faith is only once commanded in the entirety of the Old Testament: **“Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith”** (Habakkuk 2:4). This is a puzzle to many. If faith is so necessary, and salvation is based on it, why is there such an absence of outward emphasis in the Old Testament? Nevertheless, Paul said that faith was the essence of salvation even in the Old Testament. He cites as prime examples the faith of Abraham (Romans 4:1–25) and that of David (Romans 4:6–8). Indeed, the Book of Hebrews goes even further and mentions the faith of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Isaac, Jacob, Esau, Joseph, Moses, and many other Old Testament saints (Hebrews 11:1–40). This witness of Paul to the importance of faith shows how profound the matter was to him — and to God.

### **What Is Faith?**

The word *faith* in the Greek language means something very similar to our word *belief*. Actually, *faith* and *belief* are almost identical in meaning. Yet this very fact has perplexed many people because simply to believe in something does not necessarily mean that the belief is heartfelt. Even the Bible itself shows this.

**“You believe that there is one God; you do well: the devils also believe, and tremble.”**

• **James 2:19**

This shows that believing in God is not enough. It must go much further for the Christian. This is why Paul defined the belief (or faith) a person must have to find salvation.

**“For with the heart man believes unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession [of that belief] is made unto salvation.”**

• **Romans 10:10**

The belief that a person has in Christ must come from the inner man — from the heart. This type of belief represents the *faith* of the Bible. It means to place reliance upon, to trust in, to depend upon, and to put absolute confidence in Jesus Christ. When one puts that meaning to the word *faith*, he now understands the Biblical significance of the word.

### **A Simple Way to Understand Biblical Faith**

Many of the words in the Bible used by the apostles in the 1<sup>st</sup> century have lost their common

meanings over the years. One of the reasons for this is because those words are found in the Bible. Some might wonder what difference this makes. Actually, it makes all the difference in the world. The reason for this is not difficult to understand.

Any word that appears in the Bible — especially if it deals with doctrinal matters, ceremonies, or spiritual subjects — tends to become stereotyped in meaning through the ecclesiastical interpretations placed on biblical words throughout the ages. Take the word *baptize*. In the common Greek language of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, it simply meant to plunge, to dip under, to immerse. Since ecclesiastical authorities adopted sprinkling or pouring as a form of baptism, the word has taken on foreign meanings not intended by the common use of the word.

The word *faith* has not escaped this process. It would profit the Christian if he would return to the common meaning of words as originally expressed by the apostles. When we do so, much of the mystery over the significance of *faith* disappears.

There is a common English word that expresses the normal meaning of faith in an understandable way. That word is *confidence*. It comes from the Latin “*con*” (with) plus “*fidere*” (trust). Even our word “faith” reaches us through the Old French usage of the Latin *fides* which is akin to *fidere*. Really, our modern word *confidence* is a perfectly good meaning of the word faith, and with this word there are no ecclesiastical overtones attached to it.

Now, how can the word *confidence* help us to understand biblical *faith* in a better way? Simply this: each time you meet with the word *faith* in the Bible, substitute the word *confidence*. It can give a new (and proper) perspective to what Christ and the apostles meant. Notice a few examples.

**“Verily I say unto you, If you have CONFIDENCE, and doubt not, you shall not only do this which is done to the fig tree, but also if you shall say unto this mountain, Be you removed, and be cast into the sea; it shall be done.”**

• **Matthew 21:21**

The confidence, of course, must be directed to God. Christ meant that one must have complete confidence in God.

**“Therefore being justified by CONFIDENCE [in God], we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom also we have access by CONFIDENCE [in God] unto this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”**

• **Romans 5:1–2**

As an exercise towards understanding *faith*, you might find it profitable to read Hebrews chapter 11 again, but read “confidence in God” each time the word *faith* is used. That chapter, and other sections of the Bible where the word *faith* is found, will become clearer.

### **How to Express Faith or Confidence**

Faith is really a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8) and the faith that saves us is actually the faith of Christ — it is His confidence in God and God’s promises, not our own (Galatians 2:16). Yet we ourselves need as much faith as we can muster. Our personal faith needs to be increased (2 Corinthians 10:15). How can we show our faith, and how can it be strengthened?

There is a story of how the evangelist John Wesley in his young life learned what faith really was and how it could best be practiced. While he was sailing from Britain to America to preach the Gospel in Georgia, a violent storm came upon the ship. So terrible did it become that even the captain finally gave up hope of survival. As a result, almost all on the ship, including Wesley, were in thorough panic. He went to a lower deck to make his final peace with God.

That was when he noticed a group of German immigrants huddled in a corner. And remarkably, they were singing and praising God. Wesley was so taken aback at their seeming disregard for the danger they were in that he asked them why they were not terrified as everyone else. One of them said, "Oh, we are very scared, but how is a Christian supposed to act in times of danger?" The man continued, "We are told to express faith and all we are doing is acting like all Christians should act who express faith in Christ."

To John Wesley the statement was astounding. It did not seem to make any difference to those immigrants whether their faiths were strong or weak, they simply acted as they expected all Christians should act who were supposed to have faith. And by doing so, their actions were a perfect example of the exercise of faith.

Though God rescued those in the ship from the storm, John Wesley never forgot the lesson of how one can express faith in God: No matter how afraid one may become, a Christian can simply perform as one would expect any Christian to act who should have faith or confidence in God. Such action can even help to increase the faith that one has.

### ***Faith Is Needed in Prayer***

It may be little understood in some circles, but prayer is a matter of faith.<sup>1</sup> Almost all prayer in one way or another is an expression of faith. One must certainly have confidence that God is listening and that He will always respond according to His will.

**"Faith is the substance [assurance] of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"** (Hebrews 11:1). The prayer of faith is an intangible assurance of things hoped for and a "confidence" in things not seen. For those who pray in faith, they do not see or feel that they are even being heard. They simply know or have confidence that their petitions are being heard.

**"While we look not at the things which are seen, but [we look] at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal [age-lasting]."**

**• 2 Corinthians 4:18**

Those who pray the prayer of faith do so without any visible manifestation of God — and they do not require any outward, physical sensations from God to prove He is attending to their prayers. True, God often answers prayer through physical means, but that represents the

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<sup>1</sup> To some people prayer is not of faith. They want to "feel" some physical presence of God when they pray. This is fine for those who are capable of "feeling" that God is always with them, but faith is not essential when someone is able to see, hear, or feel the One to whom he is praying. *ELM*

result of prayer, not the manner of prayer.

What can the prayer of faith mean for us who are Christians today? Much in every way. It shows that it is not necessary to “feel” God or His Spirit to know we are in contact with Him. True, the saint of God can sometimes sense he is really in the presence of God while in prayer, but such a “feeling” is nowhere necessary as a sign of God’s presence. Certainly, the one praying the prayer of faith should never require such outward manifestations. It is the faith of the saint of God that convinces him he is in contact with God, not sensations. Indeed, look at what this can mean to the person who has faith (*confidence*) in God.

Suppose you do not “feel” like praying to God? This happens to all of us from time to time. But the man of faith will go ahead and pray no matter how he himself may “feel.” It is the Christian’s faith that tells him God will always listen and heed, no matter if the Christian is in low or high spirits. Look at it this way. A man may get on his knees beside his bed and see nothing but four walls, the floor and ceiling. He may not “feel” like praying at all. God may seem so far away.

What does the man of faith do? He depends not on sight or feelings. He simply has faith that God will hear him and that God will respond no matter what the physical circumstances are! God’s word says God will hear (John 9:31), so the man simply places his faith (*confidence*) in God’s promises to acknowledge him and he carries on in full assurance. This is faith in action! And this is what God wants of His people.

He wants them to rely upon Him, to trust Him, to have confidence in Him, no matter what the Christian may physically feel or see. The man of faith never requires of God a physical response — though God may respond in such a manner.

While in the Old Testament, the people were given many physical things to touch and taste in order to “experience” God; but in the New Testament, God wants the mature Christian to experience faith, and faith is discernment without touch or sight. Christ has taken away circumcision, sacrifices, sabbaths, holydays, the physical priesthood, etc., and God now wishes us to worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:21–24). He has exalted faith into a position of prime importance. We are to have faith in Christ and what He has done for us, not faith in physical ceremonies. Such a faith in Christ is the very basis of Christianity until we finally experience the promised reality.

In the resurrection, however, the full results of our faiths will be outwardly manifested to the joy and glory of us all. In the meantime, God may still answer our prayers in a physical way (if it be His will), but the saint of God depends not on sight and does not demand of God a physical response. Faith is the assurance **“of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”** (Hebrews 11:1). May God allow all of us to understand this wonderful truth and exercise our faith in Christ until the outward reality is granted to us by God. That time is nearer every day.