

–VII–

FAITH . . . AND FAITHFULNESS

Jesus promises that those who believe in Him are assured life after the resurrection. What kind of faith does He mean?

Saving Faith

Saving faith is a common catchphrase, born from evangelicals' need to condemn the "My sins are forgiven, so I can do whatever I want" idea that can easily be taken from a reading of their beliefs. At the same time, they don't wish to suggest our deeds themselves have merit, so the distinction of *saving faith* as opposed to *dead faith* (à la *James 2:20*) became a popular one. Evangelicals often characterize *dead faith* as a merely academic affirmation of Christ.

This works pretty well for most serious Christians, who are certain their faith counts as the "saving" variety. The problem is that almost any faith will produce *some* works. The faith of the people described in *Matthew 7:22* produced many works, and see where it got them! I think a reflective Christian must eventually come to the conclusion that the dichotomy between "dead faith" and "saving faith" is a false one — a contrivance to make theology go down more easily.

Let's say a Christian wins the lottery — 100 million dollars. Now, if this Christian gave 20 million dollars (completely anonymously) to charity purely due to love for Christ and then used the rest to live lavishly in a mansion,¹ is that "saving faith"? It certainly accomplished genuinely good works. But is that person living faithfully?

¹Putting aside for the moment that in the U.S. we call mansions "homes"

Living by Faith

Paul and the writer of Hebrews give us a clue as to the relationship between faith and works when they quote Habakkuk: **The righteous will live by faith.**² Real faith changes the way we live because it *changes the way we see the world*. It causes us to change our ways because our understanding of God makes us see the futility and stupidity of certain actions.

It is not that our heart has been reprogrammed. Indeed, until we receive a transformed body after the resurrection, Paul sees our flesh still pulling us against faithful living. Rather, the Spirit counsels us regarding God and gives us the *potential* to overcome the lies of this world when we see they conflict our understanding of the Almighty.

Many of Christ's teachings boil down to this idea. He mocks the Pharisees by explaining how their actions make no sense in light of their supposed beliefs about God. He describes *incongruities* between what they do and what they claim to believe. He points out it is incompatible for them to worry about what they will eat tomorrow if they believe God is loving, knows their plight, and cares for them. Rather than store up savings against unseen future calamity, they should be aiding those in need *today*. He notes the hypocrisy of expecting forgiveness from God when they do not forgive others, decries the vanity of long, loud prayers to a God who already knows their needs, and exposes the foolishness of neglecting to utilize God's gifts for good.³

Jesus refers to this foolishness in *Luke 16:8*, describing how God's people do a poor job of being wise (relative to their beliefs) as compared to those who live by the principles of the world. We who believe so often act as though we do not, like people sticking their hands in water they know is boiling. No wonder Jesus asks, **Why do you call Me "Lord, Lord" and don't do what I tell you?**

Jesus calls for a faith that provokes godly actions not merely out of gratitude of new disposition, but out of wisdom. We know it is unwise to hoard money, we know it is unwise to focus on material possessions, we know it is unwise to hold grudges, and we know it is unwise to sit in complicity while the weak are oppressed. We are not only serving God, but acting according to our understanding of how the world works. Just as a cartographer who believes the world to be round will draw a different map than one who believes the world to be flat, we should sketch out our lives in a way different from someone who believes there is no God.

²Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; and Hebrews 10:38

³Matthew 6:5-8, 19-34; 18:33-35; 19:21; Mark 10:21; 11:25; Luke 12:16-34; 18:22; and 19:20-24

Faith affects choices because *our decisions are based on what type of qualities we believe God has*. The Bible describes God as

- caring *about* us and having the power to care *for* us.
- caring about people, and by extension caring about how we treat them.
- showing particular concern for the poor, the orphaned, and the widowed.
- forgiving us and expecting us to do the same.
- rewarding those who seek righteousness while punishing those who dishonor the Almighty.

In short, we are to love *and depend on* God while zealously addressing the needs of others, especially those least able to help themselves.

I cannot stress enough the importance of depending on God. A beautiful and underappreciated verse, *Isaiah 30:15*, comes on the heels of Judah's seeking support from external, pagan allies rather than trusting in God: **For thus the Lord God . . . has said, "In repentance and rest you will be saved, In quietness and trust is your strength." But you were not willing.**

Relying on things of this world enslaves us to them. If we are slaves to our money, our house, our fence, or our retirement accounts, our actions and decisions will be guided by those masters rather than God's desires. Jesus' admonition, **no one can serve two masters**, is a timeless one.

The same goes for non-material baggage. If we are slaves to our vanity, our insecurity, our grudges, or anything else that stops us from being a light to others, we must recognize those shackles before they can be dealt with. Jesus did not intend us to be enslaved by these forces of ego.

Christian Charity

The above demonstrates how withholding aid to others is a double violation of God's will. It not only shows us to be *disobedient* (by ignoring the ten-fold repeated exhortation to provide for people's physical needs), but it shows a direct lack of *faith* as well. We hoard for ourselves possessions either to remind us of our "success" or to hedge against future calamity. How is this not like Judah putting its faith in Egypt to provide for their needs rather than trusting in God?

Breathtaking are the number and ardor of exhortations to help those in need. God's ire with those who ignored the poor is more ancient than people realize. Consider the message to Ezekiel describing Sodom. **See here — this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters had majesty, abundance of food, and enjoyed carefree ease, but they did not help the poor**

and needy... God's reproach of King Jehoiakim and extolling of Josiah reads **He upheld the cause of the poor and needy. So things went well for Judah...** **this is a good example of what it means to know Me.** Jesus counsels a rich man, **If you wish to be perfect, go sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.** Note the treasure in heaven comes upon the charity, as in *Matthew 6:20* and *Luke 12:33*, which appear to be general commands still applicable today. Cornelius' **acts of charity** apparently instigates God's grace toward him.⁴

The Jerusalem Church's only request of Paul is that he **remember the poor**, and James declares, **Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their misfortune and to keep oneself unstained by the world** before deriding those who claim to have faith without helping their fellows — **If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm and eat well," but you do not give them what the body needs, what good is it?**⁵ These are but a sample of passages regarding the importance of helping the poor. I would recommend just doing a quick Bible search online to see the torrent of verses showing God's interest in those who have limited means.

I believe evangelicals have played down this aspect of Christian instruction for several political reasons:

- Charity is too universal. Since anyone can give to others, it does not have the flavor of hard-edge Christianity that other works possess — as though any service that could be done by a non-Christian is a second-class act.
- Conservative Christians tend to extol *prudence*, and are often more interested in being financially smart than spiritually wise.
- Though the Bible decries it, Christians have not earned their judgmental reputation for nothing. Many of those who need assistance have made poor choices in the past (which, as far as I know, is part of being human). Somehow helping them today is seen as subsidizing their past behavior. We would rather sit in judgment over others than meet their needs.
- We have had it hammered into us for so long that we cannot *earn our way into heaven* that any service activity that does not include the gospel almost seems suspect.

⁴*Ezekiel 16:49; Jeremiah 22:16; Matthew 19:21; and Acts 10:4*

⁵*Galatians 2:10 and James 1:27; 2:15.*

Creating the Kingdom

The fellowship described in *Acts 2:42–47* demonstrates how faith, hope, and charity can drive the creation of God’s kingdom right here and right now. It’s a small, bright patch showing the effect Christians should create in the world. This interest in creating the kingdom fell by the wayside due to persecutions, which used to be purely political — now they are socio-political and ideological. The church is assailed on all sides and has hunkered down in defense.

I would suggest this trenched-in mentality has not ultimately met the godly goals of the church. It neither contributes to the church’s moral goals of working toward everyone’s physical and emotional welfare, nor has it called the nations to glorify God or know the Almighty. Instead, as Paul states in *Romans 2:24* (quoting Isaiah), **The name of God is being blasphemed among the Gentiles because of us.**

Given the state of today’s world, I can only assume that our methods and choices as believers have not provoked God’s full support. The world today looks very different from what the later prophets proclaimed. The reasonable conclusion is that the prophesied kingdom has not come about because we choose not to engage the world as God desires. A recurring theme of the Old Testament is that God’s will is delayed when God’s people are unfaithful.

All the abominations God decries through the prophets are still here today. The powerful still take bribes to help the rich. The poor are still oppressed and not given justice. We have 850,000,000 people without sufficient food, and war still ravishes creation. Perhaps this is what delays the second coming of Christ. In a passage quoted by Jesus, Peter, and the writer of Hebrews, God speaks to Jesus saying **And the Lord (God) said to my Lord (Jesus) “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.”**

How does God make these enemies footstools? Should we stand idly by assuming nothing is expected of us? *Perhaps* God waits for us to defeat these enemies (injustice, oppression, poverty, immorality), or at least show a desire to play our part. *2nd Peter 3:12* may refer to this.

We will continue failing to conquer these enemies of Christ so long as the church focuses its energy on division and conversion rather than discipling. *The Pharisees did exactly that, and Christ excoriates them.* In *Matthew 23:15*, part of a litany of denunciations describing how the Jewish leaders neither taught people how to properly honor God nor did so themselves, He exclaims:

Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You cross land and sea to make one convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves!

Summary and Final Notes

The simplest way to understand how we should live is to read Jesus' words very carefully. We don't read enough of Jesus in church today... and we certainly do not dwell on the harder passages. I find Christ's clarity inspirational, just as the Jews marveled, for **He spoke as one having authority**. As the officer in *John 7:46* cried out to the hostile Pharisees, **Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks**.

In addition to Christ, the Old Testament reveals a great deal about God's character. In the Mosaic law, you can find several things described as **an abomination unto God** — things that are not merely forbidden to the Israelites (like pork) but wickedness that God detests in absolute terms. The prophets reveal a raw image of what God found so wrong in the world 2500 years ago, and there is absolutely no reason to suspect things deemed ungodly then are not judged the same way now.

A surefire method of working toward creating the kingdom God desires is to work with the world rather than against it. We can help those who do not know God without subsidizing their ignorance. The unchurched's perceptions of Christians are a mirror, albeit an imperfect one, declaring a need for church reform. Jesus asks His dissenters in *John 8:46* **Who among you can prove me guilty of any sin?** Though we cannot model Christ perfectly, we should still be mindful of the charges made against us. God is not glorified when the nations slander the church.

The leaven of the Pharisees, which Jesus identifies as hypocrisy, thoroughly prevented them from doing God's will. We must transform the church to **silence the ignorance of foolish people by doing good**, as described in *1st Peter 2:15*. Indeed, 1st Peter in general is a good place to start if we want to know where the church needs to go.

INTERMISSION

I asked you earlier to separate, at least for a while, Judgment from salvation so that we could look closely at what scripture says about the former. How you use the rest of this book is rather dependent on your disposition toward what you've read so far.

I believe that the Bible solidly supports the understanding of salvation I put forth in the first few chapters of this book. The Old Testament law, the writings of the prophets who described Christ and His kingdom, the message of Jesus before He died, the gospel spread by His apostles afterward, and the epistles to Jewish and Gentile churches all point to the same conclusion. In these last four chapters, I'd like to prove that to you.

So, if your world has been turned upside down by finding out that Christianity really isn't about untying God's hands to allow our admittance to heaven, then these chapters will piece Christianity back together, showing exactly what Jesus *did* do and why **no one comes to the Father except through Him**.

If, instead, your mind is abuzz with questions like "If all this is true, then what about (*fill in the blank*)?" then these chapters will answer some of those questions.

You can also use them as primers for your own Bible study, choosing which chapter you read based on what books of the Bible you are reading. I hope you will find they broach issues that might not be obvious at first glance.

In any event, you should not feel that you have to read all these immediately, as though I am "building up" to something. I am, rather, "fleshing out." The level you read to should be based on your own needs.

Preview

The content of these chapters:

- Chapter 8 Investigates the gospel to the Jews. It focuses on the gospels and Acts. It answers questions like “What did Jesus accomplish through His death?” and “What did Jesus preach as the gospel?”
- Chapter 9 Investigates the gospel to the Gentiles. It focuses on the book of John, some critical parables in Luke, and a few key verses describing how Paul saw the “good news.”
- Chapter 10 Gives four keys to understanding Paul’s letters. It shows Paul’s priorities, how he saw salvation, his understanding of justification, what he means by “works of the Law,” and what kind of wrath he describes believers as being protected from.
- Chapter 11 Describes a theory of atonement consistent with the understanding of salvation described here. It portrays the Jewish context and need for a Messiah and answers questions like “How was Christ a sacrifice?” It also demonstrates the critical importance of all stages of Christ’s life, which is something the standard gospel does not.

These chapters become more and more demanding as you go forward.