

What is faith?

Introduction:

You may have heard the expression, “have faith” or “it takes faith” and have wondered what is faith? This short article describes faith in the context of Christianity. To understand more about Christianity, you may want to read or download the article, “What is Christianity” on the Servant’s Place.org Web Site.

Definition:

For those needing to have a definition or description of “faith” for a school report or research paper, here it is: “Faith is believing or trusting in **and** making a commitment by living according to someone or something.” It is that simple. In the context of Christianity, faith is trusting in or believing in Jesus Christ for what he has promised he has done and will do on our behalf **and** living according to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Faith involves both trust and actions.

Faith Explained:

Everyone has faith in something. Often many do not even realize that they actually have faith. For example, when they walk into a school building and sit down in the chair in the classroom they have already proven they have faith. How many test the stability of the concrete sidewalk before they step on it. They simply expect it to support their weight when they walk on it and they expect they will not fall through it. They may have opened a heavy door to enter the school building. They likely did not bring along with them a structural or building engineer to carefully examine the door and its hinges before they opened it. They simply used the door handle to open the door and fully expected it to open without it coming off its hinges and falling upon them. They used the same faith to walk on the floor of the school building and sit in the chair in the classroom. Many probably never have thought about these things not supporting them for that is what they were designed to do.

In the context of Christianity, faith is trusting in someone to do something that was prepared beforehand to be performed on our behalf. To put your faith (or trust or belief) in this someone requires that you know something about this person. Faith is not blindly trusting in what you do not know. It is trusting in what you do know. You actually have to know something about this person before making a commitment of faith. Commitment is an essential requirement of faith. You cannot claim to have faith without making a commitment. For example you may claim to have faith in the skill of your surgeon when you need an operation. But your faith is useless until you actually enter the operating room and willingly allow the surgeon to operate on you. This act of willingness is called commitment.

So far you have learned two important things about faith. The first is that faith involves trusting or believing in someone to do what they have promised to perform. The second is that faith is making a willing step of commitment to allow that someone to actually perform what was promised. Someone may say they have faith in the school system. But they can only prove this faith by attending the classes and becoming a student of that school system or by sending their children to be a student of the school system.

What is necessary to know?

In the context of Christianity something needs to be known in order to have faith in it and someone needs to be known in order to have faith in that someone. The book we find about this something and someone is called the bible. An explanation of the bible can be found in the article, "What is Christianity" mentioned above. The bible teaches that God created the world for humans to enjoy him and to glorify him forever. Because of the sin of the first humans and every human since then, humans cannot enjoy God in the way he intended since he is a holy God who cannot accept into his presence unholy and sinful humans who have been polluted by sin.

God knew that humans would sin, so before he created the world he had prepared a way for humans to have their sins forgiven and removed from them. This forgiveness and removal of their sins also involves a declaration or statement by God that these humans would be considered holy or righteous. Every human is declared to be unholy or unrighteous because humans all sin and keep on sinning. If humans continued to do this they would never be allowed into the holy presence of God and they would live forever in the terrifying and horrible predicament of existing totally apart from God. The bible teaches that humans were created to enjoy God forever and they can only do this by an act of faith.

God prepared a remedy for humans who, because of their sinfulness, could not enjoy him now or in the future. This remedy involved the sending of God's Son, Jesus Christ to become a human and to live a perfect life and to die a cruel death in place of all other humans who deserved to die because of continually committing sins. When Jesus Christ died, God placed upon him all the sins of all humans who have lived and who would ever live. This means that God accepted the death of his Son as payment for the penalty God imposed for sin. That penalty was death but not physical death. It was the death of being separated from God forever. Chapter 20 of the last book of the bible, Revelation, describes this separation as a place of torment in a lake of fire from which there is no escape. However, those who have made a commitment of faith in Jesus Christ and what he has already accomplished for them will not suffer this horrible eternal "death" but will live with and enjoy God forever.

So what is necessary to know? It is necessary to know the truth about who Jesus Christ is and what he has done for all sinners by dying in their place and taking on himself the penalty for sin they deserved to have placed on them. It is necessary to know that God lovingly has designed an eternal place for all those who have believed in (or have faith in) his Son. It is necessary to know that by having faith in God's Son, those who do this can also enjoy God every day they live and after they die, exist eternally with him in a place he has prepared for them.

So if we know this does it make us Christians?

This is a very important question. It is necessary to know the truth about God and Jesus Christ through hearing or reading about this truth in the bible. This truth is called the gospel or simply the good news. But just knowing about it is not enough. To be a Christian as the bible teaches is to actually make a commitment by faith to believe (trust unreservedly with all one's heart and mind) in the truth of the gospel and to live according to the truth of the gospel. This living according to the truth of the gospel is what proves that you actually have made a commitment of

faith and have become what the bible teaches as “born again”. To just state or say you have faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ but do not live according to the truth of the gospel is like saying you are a swimmer but have never been in the water or have never actually swam. In other words, you cannot claim to be a Christian by having faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ without living in obedience to this gospel.

What does the bible actually say about this?

Some may claim that it is not enough to just read an article about faith. These people would want to examine the statements of the bible for themselves as they may have had the impression or may have understood that all one needs to do is simply say, “I believe in Jesus Christ and therefore I am born again or I am a Christian”. They may doubt what has been stated, that commitment by living as a Christian is necessary along with belief in the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ. So what does the bible actually say about this? Here is just a sample of what the bible says:

The New Testament is the second part of the bible. The first four sections or books of the New Testament are called the gospels. The fourth book or gospel was written by the Apostle John who was a disciple of Jesus Christ and was taught personally by Jesus Christ. This fourth book of the New Testament is simply called “John” or “The Gospel According to John”.

In the third section called chapter of The Gospel According to John, is the story of Jesus Christ talking to a religious leader of the Jews called Nicodemus. Jesus told Nicodemus that, “Truly, truly, I say unto you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God”. [1] Jesus then explained to Nicodemus, the basis of being born again by stating, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” [2] Jesus in these simple statements began to explain the necessity of having faith in Himself and in what God has done so that all who have faith will live forever. But many have just taken these few words from Jesus Christ as if this was all there was to faith and have concluded wrongly that if they just say they have faith (believe) in Jesus Christ then they will have eternal life without any further action or demonstration of that faith. But the bible says a great deal more about this.

The brother of Jesus Christ was the Apostle James. He wrote a small book or letter which is also contained in the New Testament which is simply called “James” or “The Letter of James”. In this letter James further explained the truth of faith and what is needed with faith. In the second section or chapter, James stated, “What good is it, my brothers, if someone stay he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him [3] - faith by itself, if it does not have works is dead.” [4] - so faith apart from works is dead”. [5] James is saying that it is not enough to have faith which is just claiming to believe. Works, which is living according to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, must be present in the life of the believer.

The Apostle John also wrote three short letters which are found near the end of the New Testament. The first of these three letters is called “1 John” or “The First Letter of John”. In this letter, John gave more details on what Jesus Christ meant by being born again. John wrote, “If you know that he (Jesus Christ) is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him. [6] John also stated, “No one born of God makes a practice

of sinning, for God's seed abides in him and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God." [7] These two statements by John help us to understand that just faith is not enough for the believer must also "practice righteousness" or live a holy life in accordance with the teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ and must also not be one who habitually sins. The proof of one's faith is in the deeds (actions or works) one does.

John gave a few examples of what this practice of righteousness means in this letter. He stated, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God". [8] So one of the things we learn from the bible about "living our faith" is that it involves loving others. Another thing John explained about being born again is that it is shown by having victory over sin and the temptations of the world, John said, "For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world - our faith". [9] So faith is not static nor just a concept of theoretical belief, it actually does something. It has victory over the temptations of the world. The lure of the world's sinfulness will not entice those who are born again to continue to sin as John explains later in this same letter, "We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning,". [10]

Those who have been born again learn about faith and living according to the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news, through the Word of God which is the bible itself which was first preached by the Apostles and later written in letters and books which have been collected in what is called the New Testament. The Apostle Peter who was a very vocal follower of Jesus Christ and a friend of the Apostle John wrote two letters which are found just before the three letters of John near the end of the New Testament. In the first of these letters, Peter wrote, "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love for one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable through the living and abiding word of God - And this word is the good news that was preached to you". [11] So it is in the bible and more specifically the gospel (the good news) that those who would have faith in Jesus Christ are taught that faith is not just making a statement of belief but is actually an obedience to the truth (of the gospel). Peter also indicates that this obedience is shown by "sincere brotherly love for one another". This is something that we have already learned from the Apostle John (see above) in his first letter.

There is much more to be learned about faith from the bible. This short article cannot mention all that needs to be stated or learned about faith. It is a continuous act of trust and obedience for all who would claim to be born again as Jesus Christ explained is necessary in order to have eternal life. There is another Apostle that has taught about faith in the bible. His name is Paul. He was not one of the original followers of Jesus Christ as were John, James and Peter but he had a major part in bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to Europe and wrote many letters which are contained in the New Testament.

Paul also wrote about the necessity of faith and love. In one of his letters to the church at Galatia, a city in the Roman province of Asia (which is now the country of Turkey), Paul stated, "For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision [12] nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love". [13] This is very similar to what the Apostle James had written that faith without works is dead. Paul made the bold statement that faith works. It works through love

which is also the teaching of both the Apostles John and Peter. Paul expressed this thought again in a letter to another church he had started in the city of Thessalonika. He wrote to the believers in that city, “We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith” [14]. Faith and work are joined together as being essential parts of the same concept. It would be the same as if Paul had written, “you show your faith by your works”. In a follow up letter to this same church, Paul wrote, “ we always pray for you, , that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfil every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power”. [15]

The best thing about faith is that it is a gift from God. In the New Testament letter to the believers who resided in Ephesus, Paul wrote, “For by grace you have been save through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” [16] We have nothing of merit within us, nothing of value in and of ourselves, nothing of worth that we can give to God to somehow earn the salvation He alone provides. All of our best efforts and all of our so called “righteous deeds” are no more than a polluted garment.” [17]. Our attempts to earn or gain our salvation even by the strength of our own willpower is seen by God as no better than filthy rags being good for nothing. This is why faith is a gift from God. We have nothing to give to God so that we can boast of it through our sinful pride for that is exactly what God said we would do if we could somehow earn salvation through our efforts. God gave faith as a gift to us so that we might glorify and have pleasure in no one greater than God himself.

So what have we learned about faith as taught by the bible? We first learned that faith is a belief or a trust in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We next learned that faith is also a commitment by living according to or in obedience to the truth of this gospel. We then learned that faith, as an act of obedience, is shown by loving one another. Finally we learned that faith itself is a gift from God. Therefore we can conclude: Those who believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ and make a commitment by living according to the truth of the gospel and show this commitment by being obedient to this truth and by loving one another can rightly claim to be “have faith”.

Notes:

Bible Verses from the English Standard Version

1. John chapter 3 verse 3
2. John chapter 3 verse 16
3. James chapter 2 verse 14
4. James chapter 2 verse 17
5. James chapter 2 verse 26
6. 1 John chapter 2 verse 29
7. 1 John chapter 3 verse 9
8. 1 John chapter 4 verse 7
9. 1 John chapter 5 verse 4
10. 1 John chapter 5 verse 18
11. 1 Peter chapter 1 verses 22-25
12. For a explanation of this term consult a bible dictionary such as Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary, published by Thomas Nelson Publishers

13. Galatians chapter 5 verse 6
14. 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 verse 3
15. 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 verse 11
16. Ephesians 2:8-9
17. Isaiah 64:6

To learn more about this topic see the Desiring God Web Site. www.desiringgod.org
John Piper has posted on this Web Site a series of messages, on being born again, which began in November 2007, that he preached at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA. These messages provide a detailed explanation of faith and its relationship to salvation.