

WHAT JESUS TAUGHT ABOUT FAITH

(Taken and adapted from 'The Red Bits – A Study Guide' by Michael Button)

INTRODUCTION

Faith is a vital element in the Christian's relationship with the Lord. It is by faith that we lay hold of the grace of God to enter Eternal Life, and by faith that we are to walk daily in that Life.¹

A. TERMINOLOGY

Jesus did not give an ordered definition of faith but spoke of several situations where faith was active or was lacking. W.E. Vine defines the Greek word for faith (*pistis*) as 'Primarily firm persuasion, a conviction based upon hearing.'²

There are several words linked with faith that we ought to mention before embarking on our study of what Jesus taught about the subject:

- (i) *Faith*. This is the English translation of the Greek word *pistis* (as mentioned above).
- (ii) *Believe*. This is the verb, translated from the Greek verb of faith *pisteuo* – 'I believe' and its equivalents. Thus *have faith* and *believe* do not mean different things.
- (iii) *Trust*. This translates a different word that is not used in the Gospels to refer to trusting in God or spiritual things. Nevertheless, this English word gets close to a practical definition of *faith*. Herbert Lockyer writes: "Trust is the result of faith. It steps out upon God because it believes in Him. It commits to God and rests there, happy because it does not have a thought that He will fail."³
- (iv) *Faithful/Faithfulness*. This represents the other side of faith – one who can be trusted. It denotes someone who is loyal and does not depart from their allegiance or given task.

B. IN WHOM AND IN WHAT WE SHOULD PUT OUR FAITH

1. **Have faith in God** (*read* Mark 11:12-14, 20-23). The promise of spectacular results of faith in God (moving mountains) has left some Christians puzzled when they have not seen their prayers answered or faith expectations fulfilled. There are two ways of viewing this promise that might explain how this can be:

¹ Eph 2:8; Heb 10:38.

² W.E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*.

³ Herbert Lockyer, *What Jesus Taught About ...*, Vol 3, page 20.

(1) Jesus is here using a phrase that was commonly used and known by His hearers to figuratively express conquering great difficulties. This is indeed a result of faith. Many a time, believers faced with a humanly impossible situation have prayed to God, with whom all things are possible,⁴ and have seen God change or overcome the situation. It is as if a mountain has been removed and placed in the sea where it can no longer cause trouble.

(2) Jesus did mean this literally and was using the idea of a mountain as an example of what could be accomplished through faith. Something beyond normal human faith would be needed for such feats, for one would need to be sure that God wanted the topography changed dramatically! However, such faith might be possible. The Greek in which this promise is recorded in Mark's Gospel (*read* Mark 11:22) actually reads *Have (the) faith OF God*). This is the most natural understanding of the Greek and it would mean here that the faith needed for such a feat is given by God. This overcomes the problem of knowing whether or not something for which we are believing is God's will, for God would not give supernatural faith to accomplish something that is not of His will. Paul Yonghhi Cho writes "If the Holy Spirit imparts faith in the heart you can speak out ('Be removed') and it shall come to pass."⁵

As is often the case where there is more than one way of understanding a Scripture, both understandings need not be exclusive. We are expected to have faith and Jesus was disappointed how much this was lacking, even in His closest disciples,⁶ but when faith is needed beyond the natural, God can give the Gift of Faith⁷ to enable the believer to work with God to accomplish the impossible. In either case, it is important to realise that the power of accomplishing anything by faith is of God and our faith must be in *Him*, not in faith itself. Faith is like the power cable that brings the power from its source into our homes.

2. Have faith in Jesus (*read* John 14:1 and John 6:28-29).

3. Believe the Gospel (*read* Mark 1:15). The Gospel is the good news of salvation. However, it is news that has to be acted upon if it is going to do us any good. The required action is to repent. This itself arises from faith, for taking this step presupposes that we believe God's way to be the right one to take. We then need to have faith in Jesus as the One who makes salvation possible (*read* John 14:6 and John 10:9).*

C. THE POWER OF FAITH

We have seen that faith in God (especially faith *from* God) can enable God to accomplish great things. Jesus said that through faith:

⁴ Mark 10:27.

⁵ Paul Yonghhi Cho, *The Fourth Dimension*, page 113.

⁶ Matt 8:26.

⁷ 1 Cor 12:9.

* For more on faith in relation to salvation see Study SS002-18.

- (i) All things are possible (*read* Mark 9:17-27). It is interesting here that the father asked for help to overcome his lack of faith. Could this be an instance where God gave him the Gift of Faith, perhaps?⁸
- (ii) Faith releases power for healing. Jesus attributed miracles of healing to faith.
- (iii) Lack of faith restricts the working of miracles. This was particularly evident in the region where Jesus was known as the Carpenter's Son and His contemporaries did not believe this local lad could be the Messiah, nor that He had supernatural powers (*read* Matt 13:54-58).

Activity 1: Read the following verses and indicate what manner of sickness or disability Jesus healed where He attributed the healing to faith (you might need to read back a few verses to find the context in order to answer the questions):

- (a) Mark 10:52 _____
- (b) Luke 8:48 _____
- (c) Luke 17:19 _____
- (d) Luke 18:42 _____
- (e) Mark 2:5 _____

Note that, in the last of these examples, those exercising faith were not the person needing healing (we are not told whether he had faith or not) but those who were concerned for their friend.

D. DEGREES OF FAITH.

Jesus recognised that not everyone had the same level of faith. He spoke of the *faithless generation*, those of *little faith* and a Roman Centurion with *great faith*⁹. What, one wonders, would Jesus say of *our* generation?

However, one does not need a great deal of faith to accomplish great things, for Jesus illustrated the amount of faith needed to move mountains (as we saw above), as being as small as a tiny seed (*read* Luke 17:5-6). The point about the seed being so small is that it can produce something very big, just as small faith as a channel of God's power can produce big results.

E. THE FUNCTIONS OF FAITH

1. Faith is the antidote to fear (*read* Matt 8:23-26). If we are trusting in the Sovereign God, then we can rest in the assurance that, whatever happens, we shall be safe, both in this life and in the life to come (*read* Psalm 46:1-3).

⁸ Para. A.1(i)(2).

⁹ Matt 17:17; Matt 6:30; Matt 8:5-10.

2. Faith is the route to salvation and the Kingdom of Heaven (read Mark 16:16 and Luke 8:10-12).

3. Faith without seeing brings the greater blessing (read John 20:26-29). The Book of Hebrews tells us that faith is *the evidence of things not seen*.¹⁰ The converse is not necessarily true – the evidence of seeing does not always produce faith. Many people saw the evidence of Jesus doing things that are possible only to God, but they did not believe He was sent from God, even less that He was God. Jesus will not respond to those who ask Him to do something before they will believe (read Matt 12:38-39). Seeing a miracle will not build strong faith: faith must come before the miracle.

7. Faith is practical trust, not just mental acknowledgment (read Matt 14:25-31). Peter might have had *little faith*, but it was enough for him to step out of the boat in the first place. How many of us would have done that? For a few steps at least, Peter put his faith into practice by actually doing something that relied wholly on Jesus. By encouraging Peter to *come* (v29), Jesus was teaching him to use his faith in practical trust.

F. FAITHFULNESS Jesus called not only for faith but also for faithfulness:

(i) Faithful with what one had been entrusted. This is illustrated in two parables....

(1) The servants who were trusted with looking after their Master's household (read Matt 24:45-46). Each and every believer has a responsibility in the Kingdom of God, and Jesus expects to find us fulfilling that responsibility when He returns.

(2) The Parable of the Talents (read Matt 25:14-30). Each and every believer has abilities given by God as gifts, and Jesus expects us to be using those gifts until He returns. Notice in the parable that those who are faithful with what they are entrusted will be trusted with more.

(ii) Faithful in enduring to the end. Jesus expected those who follow Him to experience persecution, most of which is aimed at inducing believers to turn from trusting and following Christ. He told us to "*Endure to the end.*"¹¹ Those who want to progress in the Kingdom of God are not to look back (read Luke 9:62).

Faithfulness receives its greatest challenge in times of difficulty, but faithfulness under trial will be rewarded. After He had risen and ascended, Jesus exhorted the suffering Church at Smyrna to be *faithful until death* and promised *the crown of life*.¹²

¹⁰ Heb 11:1.

¹¹ Matt 10:22; Matt 24:13.

¹² Rev 2:10.

Activity 2: In point 4 above we saw that faith is the antidote to fear. List some things which might cause fear and decide how trust in God or trust in Jesus might relieve the fear.

Fear of can be overcome by faith in

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