

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## A Biblical Look at Some of Today's Ideas: Faith

Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today*, where we are beginning a series which is entitled "A Biblical Look at Some of Today's Ideas". Over the next four Sunday mornings, at this time, we shall be considering such topics as religion, spirituality and fundamentalism. My theme this morning, however, is "faith", which, I claim at the outset of our time together, is absolutely essential in our relationship with God.

Faith is a concept that we use widely in our everyday world for, I am sure that we have all said, or intimated, that we have faith that a certain person, perhaps a son or daughter, will carry through a particular task. Our confidence that they will faithfully carry out our wishes is, usually, based upon our previous knowledge of them. They have proved reliable and honest in the past so we have faith that they will do so in the immediate future. I once heard a preacher give an illustration of faith by pointing to a chair that someone was sitting on and claim that the person must have had faith that the chair would support them, or else they would not have sat on it. This is not what I consider the Bible means when it talks about faith, for the preacher's definition of faith is founded upon sensory perception. His confidence that the chair will support him is based upon observation and long experiences of the support that four sturdy legs and the known strength of the material give to him. That, I suggest, is not what the Bible means by faith.

Vine, in his *Dictionary of New Testament Words*, defines "faith" as a "firm conviction based upon hearing, and in New Testament usage, always refers to faith in God or the Lord Jesus". Sometimes it has the thought of trust, such as 1 Corinthians 15:14: "And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain."

Our trust or faith is in Christ. There are similar thoughts expressed in other letters of the New Testament, but we have no time to look them up now. Sometimes "faith" involves the thought of "faithfulness" as in Romans 3:3, and I read from the English Standard Version: "What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?"

Other times it refers to the body of truth in which we believe, such as that mentioned in Acts 14:22 when Paul and Barnabas visited Antioch and Iconium: "Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter the kingdom of God."

If we look at Acts 6:7-8, we get examples of "faith" as a body of truth and "faith" as a personal trust or belief: "And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith. And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people."

Notice, the priests were obedient to the faith, in other words the body of truth concerning Jesus, whereas Stephen is personally persuaded of the truth of what he preached. The important matter that I wish to emphasise at this point is not the technical nature of the various uses of the word "faith" in the Bible, but, rather, whether we have faith in the Lord Jesus at this present moment. Have we responded in the same manner as did the jailer at Philippi, when he was told to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? When he did so, he rejoiced with his entire house. For the sake of clarity, I wish to summarise my opening remarks by simply stating that for Christians faith involves acceptance of the work and person of Jesus, as proclaimed in the Gospel. I would also suggest that if we have faith in Jesus we will be obedient to His teachings.

For myself I am persuaded that Hebrews 11:6 is the key to understanding the biblical view of faith as it applies to us: "But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him."

I would also emphasise, in connection with Hebrews 11:6, that it does not ask for belief in the existence of a god, but rather belief in the existence of THE God, who in times past revealed Himself to the fathers and spoke through the prophets (see Hebrews 1:1). Thus, if we have faith, of the type the author of Hebrews writes about, then we have accepted the truth of the unseen spiritual world, ordered by Him, who is King of kings and supreme Governor of the universe (see Revelation 19:16).

That does not mean that we can answer every question as to the whys and wherefores of creation, or why there is suffering and injustice in our world. It does mean, however, that when, through grace, we accept the existence of the God revealed in the Bible we begin a journey of faith, which takes us into the strongholds of divine power. Many hymn writers have expressed this truth yet, through the pressure of time, I can quote only one, which was written almost two hundred years ago by Sir Robert Grant, Member of Parliament for Inverness:

*Oh, worship the King, all glorious above!  
Oh, gratefully sing His power and His love;  
Our Shield and Defender, the Ancient of Days,  
Pavilioned in splendour, and girded with praise.*

*O measureless Might! Ineffable Love!  
While angels delight, to hymn Thee above,  
The humbler creation, though feeble their lays,  
With true adoration shall sing to Thy praise.*

Without faith, we shall never know anything of the almighty greatness of the living God, or His great redeeming power. The prize for those who seek Him is that they will, through God's grace, find Him (See Hebrews 11:6).

Perhaps we should have started with looking at Hebrews 11:1, so, to remedy that deficiency, I will read it now, and as usual I shall be using the Authorised or King James translation: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen". There is the thought, in Hebrews 11:1, that faith brings us into a world, where things that have no tangible existence, as in our present material world, become real and substantial through faith.

Many years ago I was employed as a centre lathe turner, on machine tool maintenance, for a well known manufacturer of luxury cars. One of the machine tool fitters used to ask me to show him my God, then he would take me to The Albion, a pub in the town where we both lived, and he would show me his god. I emphasise that there was nothing sinister or cruel in his taunts, as we were good work colleagues, and he was only joking, but there is a measure of truth in what he said. I could not show him, because my God, in the words of the hymn, is "Immortal and invisible". He could take me to a place where, in his words, his god could be found. I knew, however, that my God did live and loved me with an everlasting love. I am sure that many listening this morning know and worship that same God, who is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Some commentators suggest that the Authorised Version's use of "substance", in the phrase "substance of things hoped for", is better translated as "assurance", which would be in line with the thought, expressed by the Apostle Paul, in Romans 8:24-25: "For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it."

That hope, or assurance, or conviction, of the reality of the unseen world, which is the result of our faith, affects us in at least two ways. Firstly, we embrace that which is unseen because it belongs to the spiritual order, and secondly, because some of the unseen things await fulfilment in the future. To illustrate what I mean by that, I am unable to think of a better example than the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. This has an impact upon me because I have believed the Gospel. Secondly, I believe in the doctrines of the end times, in the coming again of the Lord Jesus and in the judgment which follows. These are future, but my faith accepts them as real events and I live accordingly.

To further enlarge upon this point, I will return to the preacher's example of faith, when he pointed to the chair. I said then that our trust that the chair will support us is not, I repeat not, based upon faith. Rather is it that our eyesight, and other senses, produces a confidence or evidence of visible things, and we know by proven experience that the chair will support us. We know physical objects exist because we can see and feel them. Faith, however, is the organ that brings us into contact with the spiritual, or invisible, world. It is not, as the mockers and scoffers claim, that we are prey to our imaginations. We know the reality of God's world, for we who believe have, through faith and God's grace, been initiated into it.

A good example of some showing faith whilst others did not believe, is when Paul preached the Gospel at Athens The conclusion of his sermon is recorded in Acts 17:31-34: "Because he [God] hath appointed a day in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead. And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter. So Paul departed from among them. Howbeit certain men clave unto him and believed: among which was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them."

Notice that it was when Paul mentions aspects of the unseen world, such as the resurrection of Jesus, that the mockery began. Two thousand years might have passed, yet unless physical proof is presented to people today the answer is still mockery or indifference.

Many years ago, in the town where I live, a campaign was organised by a local church in an attempt to increase the attendance. Leaflets were posted through every letter-box with an opening sentence saying something like, "If your religion demands you to believe something that you can't believe then come to our services, where you will hear something you can believe." Though I did not attend any of the services, it would seem from the invitation that they were preaching a message based upon only what our five senses would accept. The message of the Bible, whether from the Old or New Testament, concerns the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and His loving concern for each of us. Without a shadow of doubt, we need faith to grasp the wonder of such a statement as John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

Such is the message of God to us today. What is our response this morning to such a statement? Do we believe it, or reject it as impossible and unbelievable?

Now, as we move on have you noticed that for the last couple of minutes I have been talking about belief rather than faith? I do so deliberately because the Old Testament deals with a people who were in covenant relationship with Him. Generally, their faith in God was assumed by all the prophets, who fervently proclaimed their desire that the people should prove faithful to the covenant. In other words, their actions should align with their belief in God, and His promises. It is pertinent to note that faith is only mentioned twice in the King James Version of the Old Testament, yet when we come to the Christian era, and the preaching of the apostles, there is usually a request or demand that we believe the message of Christ crucified, and of personal faith in Him. Thus there is a clear distinction between faith or belief on one hand, and trust and hope on the other. Faith is taking God at His word, whereas trust and hope are the results of faith.

If you have just joined us, and are wondering just what we are discussing, can I inform you that you are listening to *Truth for Today*, where we are considering the word "faith" in its biblical context? Though I have just said that "faith" is hardly mentioned in the Old Testament, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews seizes many examples from the personalities of this former dispensation to use as examples, when he illustrates how we ought to act if we have faith. Abraham, Noah, Enoch, Isaac, Jacob and Moses, are just a few of the many that he cites. I want to mention, however, the faith of the Israelites as a whole by quoting Hebrews 11:29-30: "By faith they passed through the Red sea as by dry land: which the Egyptians assaying to do were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell down, after they were compassed about seven days."

There is no doubt in my mind, that it was the faith of Moses that galvanised the people to have the faith to venture into the water, as previously they were complaining and fearful as they reached the sea-shore. It was then, at the command of Moses, that they saw "the salvation of the LORD" as we can read in Exodus 14:13. It could be said that it was an act of God that caused the sea to draw back, allowing the people to pass through safely. It could also be claimed that the east wind was the cause, yet the author of Hebrews claims it as a victory of faith. Obviously, it was God who caused the east wind to blow in order for His saving purposes to be accomplished, but, and it is a big but, it was their faith that appropriated it.

Sadly, there are no further acts of faith that the author can cite until forty years had passed. If you remember the story, you will recall that when Moses sent twelve men to clarify the conditions in Canaan (Numbers 13:1-14:45) only two of them, Caleb and Joshua, brought back a good report (Numbers 13:30, Numbers 14:7-8). The others saw giants and great difficulties (Numbers 13:27-28). They no longer reckoned with the power of their unseen God. Faith, now, was not part of the equation. The people turned away to wander in the wilderness where most of them died (Numbers 14:26-38). When they arrive on the border of Canaan again, Hebrews tells us that they responded in faith. "The walls of Jericho fell down" (Hebrews 11:30, see Joshua 6:20). What a tremendous victory is recounted with such economy of language. Again, that victory is put down to their faith. In simply obeying the command of Joshua, their leader, they gained the victory of the great and mighty city of Jericho (Joshua 6:1-27). How ridiculous, some would say, when the plan was first divulged to them! (Joshua 6:1-7) How could walking in silence around the walls then suddenly make a great noise bring them victory? Yet it did, because they believed and obeyed.

We do not know the cause of the collapse of the walls of Jericho, whether it was an earthquake, or subsidence, or some other cause. FF Bruce has the best answer when he wrote in one of his commentaries: "But the forces that operate in the unseen realm, such as the power of faith, cannot be dug up by the excavator's spade" (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, FF Bruce).

He might have added that neither can the answers to prayer be unearthed by the archaeologist's trowel. Let us remind ourselves of some words of the Apostle Paul: "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (for the

weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds:) casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ", 2 Corinthians 10:3-5.

As we seek to follow the Lord Jesus in the materialistic and increasingly anti-God society in which we live, we have no other resources to meet our spiritual "Jerichos" than those made available to us through our faith in God.

We must not, however, think that because we have faith in the risen Lord that every step of our journey will take us through broad sunlit uplands, to use a famous phrase. The letter to the Hebrews tells us that for some it meant trials of cruel mockings and scourging. Hebrews 11:37 itemises the sufferings of some who had faith in God: "They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins: being destitute, afflicted, tormented". The author of the letter states, categorically, that these retained their faith in God, despite their sufferings.

As we approach the end of our time together this morning, I want to use some words of Romaine, a Christian from a past age, who wrote: "Faith signifies believing the truth of the Word of God; it relates to some word spoken or to some promise made by Him, and expresses the belief which a person who hears it has of it being true; he assents to it, relies upon it, and acts accordingly: this is faith."

Faith caused Noah to build an ark, Abraham to leave his home in Ur of the Chaldees, and faith caused Joseph to give directions about his bones; it motivated the Apostle Paul to travel the known world speaking about his Lord; it led David Livingstone to Africa and William Carey to India. May I respectfully ask, "How far has our faith in Christ taken us?"

I close with these words of St Augustine who said: "Faith is to believe what we do not see and the reward of this faith is to see what we believe."

I pray that each of us, hearer and listener alike, has faith in the God who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, who no one has ever seen or can see (see 1 Timothy 6:15-16). I am absolutely convinced that this God has been revealed to us by His only begotten Son, who was given the name of Jesus.

Good morning and thank you for listening.

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