

What are the themes of “faith” in the Old Testament?
A Series on What does Faith Mean: Part 2

1. The account of Abram in Genesis 15:6 is referenced three times in the New Testament (Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6 and James 2:23). What is this verse revealing about Abram’s faith, and how does this help us understand the concept of faith?

It is important to note that Abram’s faith began at an earlier point (Gen 12:1-4). Without seeing God or having any evidence of His real existence, Abram obeys the voice of God and leaves Haran. This passage indicates that the faith of Abram is ready to accept the rich promises of the living God; the word of God is now Abram’s security and base. God treats this trust of Abram as behavior appropriate to the covenant relationship. The unconditional Abrahamic Covenant was the result of Abram’s faith which was declared “righteous,” and God changes Abram’s name (“father is exalted”) to Abraham (“father of multitude”) (Gen 17:5).

Abraham is considered a great example of faith (Rom 4:1-3; Gal 3:6-14; James 2:23), because he trusted the divine promises which he personally saw only partially fulfilled. Because of Abraham’s trust of the unseen, God identified Himself as “the God of Abraham” (Ex 3:6) and Abraham became known as “God’s friend forever” (2 Chron 20:7).

2. In the preceding example, Abraham based his faith on a promise of the future (Gen 12:1-4) and without any miracle(s) that would confirm the divine source. In contrast study Exodus 4:1-9 and examine how God responds to Moses’ fear of his people questioning the authority of his leadership of redemption from Egypt. What do you learn about faith here?

For those Hebrews who question Moses’ authority, God promises three miracles that Moses could use to confirm that he was sent by God to free his people from the tyranny of Pharaoh (Ex 4:3-9).

In this instance, the faith of the Hebrew was based on divine evidence that authenticated Moses as being sent by God for the mission of redeeming His people from the Egyptians (Ex 4:29-31). Faith was based on miracles that they could see and experience. Salvation from Egypt was only possible through faith in the tangible God and His word through His emissary Moses.

Faith takes on a more concrete basis as the promises of Abraham become assurance for future generations (Ex 32:13; 33:1).

3. Study 2 Kings 16:1-14; Isaiah 7:1-12 and 8:1-17. Who is King Ahaz and what is happening here? Examine the faith of the prophet Isaiah; what do you discover?

As king of Judah, Ahaz was an evil king who practiced heinous idolatry worship rituals as kings of Israel including the sacrifice of his own son and worshipping in high places (2 Kings 16:3-4, 11). At this moment, Ahaz, king of Judah is being threatened by the alliance of Rezin, king of Syria and Pekah, king of Israel (Isa 7:1-2). For this crisis, God calls on the prophet Isaiah to advise Ahaz (Isa 7:3).

With regard to faith, Isaiah’s advice to Ahaz is clear, “If you will not believe, you surely shall not last” (Isa 7:9). Isaiah is explicit; faith involves an intellectual and volitional response to revelation (i.e. God revealed Himself with the miraculous signs of the Exodus).

With regard to his personal faith, Isaiah says, “I will wait for the Lord who is hiding His face from the house of Jacob; I will even look eagerly for Him” (Isa 8:17). The grammatical tense of his statement is directed towards the future.

In this coming crisis, Isaiah exhibits a believing trust in God. Faith is the way of deliverance but based on a future beyond the disaster.

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4. The book of Habakkuk is unique for its record of the prophet dialoguing with God. Why do the evil prosper and the righteous suffer? The future of the nation of Judah was being threatened by the army of Babylon, which God sent as judgment. In response to Habakkuk's pleas, God promises that the righteous will survive (Hab 2). God's response in Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted by the Apostle Paul in three instances (Rom 1:16-17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38-39). Examine Habakkuk 2:2-4 and try to understand what God was saying about faith.

In response to Habakkuk's complaint of Babylon, God reveals a prophecy that will occur with certainty at its appointed time. God contrasts the conceited character of the “proud” Babylonians with the “righteous” in Judah who live by faith.

The contrast is revealing, the faithful Hebrew lives a humble life of obedience and trust in God. While much of the faith in the Old Testament was concerned with the physical salvation of the righteous remnant of Israel, there is an emphasis on the personal development of faith, a living and believing trust in God. Furthermore, as faith was grounded in the historical divine events and promises of the past, the focus was on the future.

This concept is carried over into the New Testament.

In Romans 1:16-17, Paul evangelizes with the Gospel and reiterates the historical priority of first coming to the Jew and then to the Gentile. Living by faith in Jesus Christ reflects the trust that Christians have in Christ as the way to live, according to God's word, and with the assurance of salvation.

In Galatians 3:11, Paul emphasizes that salvation is based on faith in Christ, contrary to the former legal adherence to the Mosaic Law, which was not the basis of justification before God.

In Hebrews 10:38-39, Paul uses a contrast much like God did in Habakkuk. The righteous are those who draw closer to the source of their faith; those who are not righteous “shrink back” from God and towards destruction. The contrast serves to encourage Believers to persevere and be determined in their faith.

Pagan worship during the Old Testament placed their confidence in idols or cultic / magical practices in a manner where the worshipper felt he had some control over his destiny. Because the worship of God was imageless, the devout Hebrew did not have such resources and was wholly dependent on the word of God.

God saves those who sincerely trust in Him. God is the object of faith, and His words guide human beings to Him. This principle continues today in the New Testament church.

References:

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2. Harris RL, Archer Jr GL, and Waltke BK., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Chicago: Moody Press, (1980).

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