

What does Paul say about “faith”?
A series on faith: part 5

There is an impression that early Christianity was seen as a part of Judaism (Acts 15:1-5). As a former Pharisee, how did this affect the apostle Paul’s understanding of the term “faith”? To examine this in context, it is important to examine the Mosaic Covenant and the relationship between faith and works.

The Ten Commandments begin with “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (Ex 20:2; Deut 5:6). Before any law was given, this preamble revealed God’s intention for the nation of Israel: obedience to the Law was a grateful response by those who were saved.

By grace alone and by their faith that God would secure their release from Egypt and hold up the waters of the Red Sea, the nation of Israel was saved from Pharaoh (Ex 14:13-31).

Obedience to the Law was an expression of a covenant relationship. What mattered to God was Israel’s faith and commitment to Him, and only after the nation of Israel made such a commitment did God reveal the Law (Ex 19:7-17).

True obedience to the Law was an outward expression of the Hebrew’s inward disposition of faith and fear of God in a covenant relationship with Him.

The Covenant was conditioned on Israel’s obedience and determined whether it fulfills the mission that it was called to (Ex 19:5-6; Deut 26:16-19) and receives the blessings of God’s people (Lev 26:1-13; Deut 28:1-4).

However in time, the nation of Israel perverted obedience to the Law into a condition for salvation and blessing. The Old Testament prophets repeatedly rebuked the nation for substituting rituals prescribed for the Law as the object of faith instead of God (Isa 1:10-17; Amos 5:21-27; Mic 6:6-8). Judaism became a religion that emphasized the knowledge and practice of the Law as the basis of faith; for the Jew, proving one’s worth constituted authentic testimony.

Before his conversion, the Pharisee Saul understood faith as an act of obedience; righteousness was based on works.

After his conversion, the apostle Paul understood the difference in the basis of his new faith. Under Judaism, God’s people lived under that Law; under Christianity, God’s people lived under the grace of Jesus Christ (John 1:7; 2 Cor 3:6-7; Gal 3:19-29). Throughout his letters, which were in response to questions raised by various churches, the apostle Paul teaches that “faith” is the act of believing. He uses a variety of Greek terms to convey this message:

Pisteuein is an adjective that describes those who turned to God, based on the gospel message, as “believing” (1 Cor 15:2, 11).

Hoi pisteuontes is a noun used to address his readers as “believers” (Rom 1:16; 3:22; 4:11; 1 Cor 1:21).

Hē pistis is the noun “faith” that specifically refers to salvation and conduct based on the gospel (Rom 1:8; 1 Cor 2:5; 15:14, 17). In this context, it is the saving faith that is based on the cross of Jesus and his resurrection (1 Cor 15:4-11).

Thus when addressing Jews and Judaism, Paul teaches that righteous, received by faith in Jesus Christ, is a gift of grace contradicting the Jewish idea that righteousness is based on doing the Law (Gal 3:10, 23; Rom 3:27-31).

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Perhaps due to Judaism’s misplaced basis of faith and confusion over the relationship between the Mosaic Covenant with Jesus Christ, much of Paul’s writings about faith dealt with its relationship to works and the Law.

Paul affirms the Law as the basis of learning what sin was (Rom 7:7) and that it was holy, righteous and good (Rom 7:12-14; 1 Tim 1:8). Furthermore, Paul captures the spirit of the Law: love God and one’s neighbor (Rom 13:8-10; Gal 5:13).

But in his debates with Jews, Paul firmly asserts righteousness comes only by faith and cites father Abraham as the principle example (Gal 3:6-9). Quoting Deuteronomy 27:26, Paul contradicts Jewish teaching by showing that the Law demanded perfection and that any failure resulted in a curse (Gal 3:13). Only faith in Jesus, the blessing of Abraham, can redeem mankind from the curse of the Law (Gal 3:14).

Paul’s emphasis of the New Covenant implies that his opponents were ministers of the Old Covenant (Mosaic), which “kills” (2 Cor 3:6). God promised a New Covenant (Jer 31:31-34; 32:40), because of the nation of Israel’s unfaithfulness (to learn more about the New Covenant, see www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/1God/CovenantNew.aspx.)

With Paul’s assertion that righteousness is by faith and not by works, how does this reconcile with the James’ assertion that justification is by works and not by faith alone (Jam 2:24)?

Committed to preaching the gospel, Paul endeavors to encourage obedience among all Believers (Rom 1:5; 16:26), and he has this obedience in view when referencing the works of Believers (Rom 15:18; 16:19).

Faith has the character of obedience not unlike that of the Jews’ obedience to the Law. An example of this is Paul’s use of a double negative to emphasize his obedience to Christ (Acts 26:19) and imply the Jews (King Agrippa and others) disobedience to the Scriptures (Acts 26:27).

Both Paul and Peter share the idea that obedience to Christ, His messengers and the message they proclaim is the means for sanctification (Rom 6:7, 16; Phil 2:12; 1 Pet 1:2, 22). Christians are “children of obedience” (1 Pet 1:14)

The obedience rendered to Christ is the obedience of faith and results in works; however, Paul and James are making arguments for different audiences.

Paul quotes Genesis 15:6 in stating that Abraham was justified by faith (Rom 4:3), because the Jews did not have genuine faith.

James quotes Genesis 15:6 in stating that Abraham was justified by faith evidenced by what he did (Jam 2:23-24), because he was exhorting Christians to a more godly life.

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While much of Paul's preaching regarding “faith” is about justifying faith (faith that saves), he includes faith as a spiritual gift.

As a spiritual gift, “faith” here is not for personal enrichment but instead for building up others within the church (1 Cor 12:4-25; 14:12).

And while saving faith is a trust in the knowledge that Jesus Christ provided for forgiveness of sins and eternal life with God, the spiritual gift of “faith” is distinct from the gifts of “wisdom” and “knowledge”.

It would seem that Paul is indicating that the spiritual gift of faith is an unusual measure of trust in God that is exercised beyond most Christians.

How do you know if you have faith? Ponder Hebrews 11:1-13 and observe the common theme. Obedience that reflects a trust and reality of God's word is the standard by which God judges!

References:

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