

“The Fruit of the Spirit: Faith / Faithfulness”

(Galatians 5.22-23a)

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The fruit of the Spirit is ... faithfulness. Or is it? Most English translations say “faithfulness.” The King James and a number of others versions simply say “faith.” The Greek word is *pistis*; it shows up about 250 times in the New Testament; when seminary students are memorizing important vocabulary words, they typically learn that *pistis* means “faith.” So why do most translations say “faithfulness”? Is there a difference between “faith” and “faithfulness”? What does “faith” mean, in the first place?

Well, Merriam-Webster offers there three broad definitions of the word “faith.” The first has to do with *allegiance* to duty or to a person (like *loyalty*), or with *fidelity* to one’s promises, or with *sincerity* of intention. You can “lose faith” in somebody, or you can act “in good faith.” This first definition doesn’t really have anything to do with God; there is nothing explicitly religious about it. The second definition of “faith” moves into the realm of *belief*. Here we have *complete trust* or a *firm belief in something for which there is no proof*. The example Merriam-Webster gives is of a mother “clinging to the faith that her missing son would one day return.” She *believes* it’s going to happen, but she has no proof. You can have that kind of faith in God; Merriam-Webster calls this “belief and trust in and loyalty to a God,” or “belief in the traditional doctrines of a religion.” There’s an interesting distinction there; when you say you “believe,” that you “have faith,” are you saying that you believe in *God*, or that you believe in *the church’s teaching about God*? I’m inclined to think that the belief in God needs to come *first*, and then out of that can grow the belief in the various doctrines of the Church. Then, there’s a third definition: *something that is believed with strong conviction, especially a set of religious beliefs*. Example: “the Protestant faith,” the whole kit and caboodle. So, broadly speaking, our word “faith” can have to do with faith *in a person*, or faith *in God*, or faith *in a set of religious beliefs*.

The Greek word *pistis* has a similar range of meanings. The word existed long before the New Testament; Christians did not invent this term. Greeks used it to refer to the conviction of the truth of anything, that is, a *belief*, which might or might not have anything to do with God; or to refer to the character of somebody who could be relied upon – their fidelity, their faithfulness. It was a word which could be used in a secular sense, *and* in a spiritual sense, just like our word “faith.”

In the New Testament, in the book of Hebrews, we are given a definition of faith: “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1) It is the most articulate definition of faith anywhere in the Bible. Unfortunately, it does not encompass *all* the ways

the word gets used by the biblical writers. People who have really studied how the word carefully would say there's *more* to faith than just that. Don't limit your understanding of the word "faith" to what the writer of Hebrews says here, even if it looks like that's the clearest definition anywhere in the Bible. Yes, faith is an *assurance* of things hoped for, a *conviction* of things not seen ... but there's more.

So, what else? What else does "faith" refer to? Well, faith in *God*, obviously. Hebrews also says this: "anyone who approaches God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." (Hebrews 11:6) Peter says to a group of Christians, "you have come to trust in God." (1 Peter 1:21) Faith, in a Christian sense, has to do with faith *in God*. But how do you believe in God? For some people, that's easy; it just comes naturally to them. For others, it's very difficult. Maybe they were taught some things about God when they were young that weren't very solid teachings and didn't hold up over time. Or, maybe some painful things happened to them that caused their faith and trust in God to rupture. Or, maybe they didn't grow up believing in God, and legitimately wonder, "why should I start believing in God *now*?" A lot of people in our world today are in one of those three categories, which is part of the reason why churches across our country are having trouble bringing in new members. There are plenty of people out there, but a lot of them aren't sure they really believe in God.

So, what do you do, if you *want* to believe in God? Well, you could read a philosophical treatise that tries to "prove" the existence of God. Such things exist, of course. There are also plenty of other treatises that argue the opposite. There's a whole section of philosophy devoted to the question of "the existence of God." I wandered down some of those roads long ago; I didn't find it a terribly fruitful enterprise. I don't think most people are going to come to faith in God by reading a treatise. Perhaps some of those treatises succeed in persuading people to give *intellectual assent* to a belief in God ... but that's not really *faith*. Real faith isn't just an *intellectual* exercise. Real faith emanates from your *soul*.

So how *do* you come to believe in God, if you don't? Well, let's expand this verse a little bit. Here's Peter's full sentence: "Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God." (1 Peter 1:21) Who's the "him"? Jesus, of course. *Through Jesus you have come to trust in God*. Back up even further; let's start at verse 18: "You know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you have come to trust in God...." (1 Peter 1:18-21) Interesting. So these people came to believe in God through Jesus, *why*? Because they were *redeemed from an empty way of life by the precious blood of Christ*. Connect the dots here. Jesus did something on the cross that literally *changed these peoples' lives*. Changed the way they were looking at life, changed the way they were living life, changed the way they were *feeling* about life. They went from feeling *empty* to feeling *redeemed*. Other translations say "ransomed" or even "liberated." There's something that *happens* when we come to understand in our heads and feel in our hearts what Jesus has done for us. We're all trying to live a reasonably decent life, we have our share of screw-ups and mistakes, the things we do or say or feel that we wish we didn't, the things we *don't* do or say or feel that we wish we did; we can all be difficult, annoying; sometimes we hurt people ... and yet ... *Jesus LOVES us*. He's taken all our mistakes, all our screw-ups, all the ways we let God down, and said, "They

don't matter. I'm wiping them clean, because I love you *that much*. I'm giving you gifts, because I love you *that much*. I'm providing an inheritance for you, because I love you *that much*." He does that for both me and you. What an incredibly precious gift. He loves ... *us*? Even after ... *that*? Yes, he does.

So faith in God has to do with faith in Jesus, especially his mighty work of salvation on our behalf. It's not just the *facts* about Christ's life and death and resurrection that matter; it's the way those facts *impact us* – in our head, our heart, our *soul*. When we begin to understand the dynamic significance of what it really means, the profound depth of what Christ has done, it affects *everything*. Paul describes it like this: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:19-20) Actually, more literally, it goes something like this: "the life I now live ... I live *in* the faith *of* the Son of God." *In* the faith *of* the Son of God. Does this mean, you live your life, believing "in Jesus" (as it is commonly taught), or does it mean, *being able* to live your life *because* of the faith which Jesus himself had? Do you see the difference? "The life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God." Or, "The life I now live, I live *in* the faith *of* the Son of God." Do we live the Christian life because of our beliefs, or are we *enabled* to live the Christian life because *Christ's own life of faithfulness* spills over into ours? Many biblical interpreters think it's actually the latter – that there's something about the faith of Jesus himself, the *faithfulness* with which he lived his *own* life, that gets shared with us, that *enables* us to live "in Christ." It is a subtle but crucially important distinction. The first interpretation focuses on what we *believe*. The second focuses on the *gift* we receive.

This is complicated, and honestly I'm not sure I'm doing it justice, but I think these biblical interpreters are on to something. Faith is not just about what we believe in our *head*. It is, rather, the *gift of the Holy Spirit* that comes to us as we grow in our understanding of Christ's death that gives us life. Faith is not something we can *generate* on our own. It is something we are *given*. It is a work of *God*, in our hearts, as we grow in our understanding of Jesus, who came down from heaven "for us and our salvation." This faith enables us to grow in Christ-like ways as God cleanses and redeems our hearts.

So what does this mean? If you find yourself lacking in faith, *what do you need to do*? I don't think you need to read a philosophical treatise about why there is (or is not) a god. I *do* think you need to devote some time and energy to the intersection where Christ's life and your life meet. There are some things you need to *learn*, if you don't know them already, about what Christ has done *for you*. Line those things up with everything you know to be true about yourself. The things you say and do, the way you *really feel*, deep down inside. Your worries, your fears, your regrets, your stresses, *all* of it. If your life is going like *this* ... and Christ's life and work is going like *this* ... let him run into you. Let him run into you, *hard*. The bigger the crash, the better! Let him run you right over! *FEEL* what he has done, what he *is doing*, right now. There might be some pain, at first. There might be some tears. It might not feel comfortable immediately. It's okay. Just trust him. Trust him with your *life*. Let him *heal* you. Let him bring *wholeness* to your life. Love. Forgiveness. Grace. Restoration. Redemption. All the gifts that he offers you, take them *all*, don't turn *any* of them down. Watch what *happens* to your life. When your life collides with Christ's life, you walk away with *his* faithfulness, growing inside of you.

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