



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.4.1 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Faith

We have already referred to faith many times in what we have studied so far. But since the word “faith” is so often misused and misunderstood in religious talk, it is good that we take a very close look at what the Bible says about faith.

Other words such as “trust”, “confidence”, “reliance”, or “dependence” can usually be substituted for the word “faith” without any real change in meaning. The apostle Paul used the example of Abraham to bring out the meaning of the word “faith”. God first came to Abraham with the great promise recorded in Genesis 12:1-3. God promised to give Abraham a land, a nation, a name, protection from all foes, and, above all, the promise that **“in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”** (Genesis 12:3). On the basis of this promise Abraham moved to the land of Canaan with his family and lived there as a wandering nomad. God repeated His promise to Abraham from time to time, most notably when God brought him outside and showed him the vast number of stars in the sky. God then said to him: **“So shall your descendants be”** (Genesis 15:5). We are told at that point that Abraham **“believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness”** (Genesis 15:6). To believe in the Lord is to have faith and confidence in what He says to us, that is, to trust in Him, to depend on His Word, to rest your hopes in what He has said.

On the basis of this account in Genesis, the apostle Paul presents Abraham as an example of justification by faith. He writes: **“What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.’ Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness”** (Romans 4:3-5). Notice that faith is contrasted with works. Works is associated with pay received for work rendered. A man works and gets paid for it. But faith is not a work of man. Faith is not a relying on one’s self to accomplish a certain thing and get paid for it. Faith is depending on something else, on Someone else, in this case, on God and His promise. To someone who believes God’s promise, God counts that faith in God as righteousness. We understand that the core of God’s promise to Abraham was the promise that He would send a Savior to be born from Abraham’s family who would be a blessing for the entire world.

Continuing to present Abraham as an example of faith, the apostle Paul says that Abraham, **“contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah’s womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform”** (Romans 4:18-21).

When God showed Abraham the stars of the sky and made His promise about his descendants, Abraham was already an old man, and his wife Sarah was an old woman who had been barren her entire life. Using his reason or common sense, Abraham could conclude that he and Sarah would never have any children. But Abraham believed God’s promise. He was convinced that God would do as He said He would do. Thus, faith is essentially trust and confidence in something else or someone else. In Abraham’s case he trusted in God and His promises.

The letter to the Hebrews also presents Abraham as an example of faith in God's promises, along with many other Old Testament examples of faith. The author begins his discussion of faith with this definition: **"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"** (Hebrews 11:1). Abraham had no evidence that he would have descendants through Sarah. All he had was God's Word, but for faith God's Word is sufficient, and nothing more is needed.

So we read: **"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going"** (Hebrews 11:8). Why did he go out? Because he believed God's promise that God would give him and his seed a land.

"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, 'In Isaac your seed shall be called,' concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead" (Hebrews 11:17-19). After God fulfilled His promise and gave Abraham and Sarah their son Isaac, God told Abraham to offer up his son Isaac to God as a sacrifice, and Abraham was willing to do this. Why was he willing? Because Abraham believed God's promise that in his son Isaac the whole world would be blessed. In this faith Abraham was about to kill his own son, believing that God could raise him up again from the dead in order to fulfill His promise. As we know from Genesis, Abraham already had the knife in his hand to kill his son, when God intervened and told Abraham not to lay his hand on his son (Genesis 22:10-12).

Other illustrations and examples of faith abound in the Scriptures. Paul says: **"In whom (Christ) we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him"** (Ephesians 3:12). Faith in Christ leads to boldness and confidence to pray to our God in Christ's name.

Jesus used an incident recorded in the book of Numbers to illustrate faith. When the Israelites were traveling through the wilderness, they complained to God, and God sent them serpents who bit them and caused them to die. The people repented of their complaining, and God gave Moses a strange antidote for the poison. He told Moses to put up a bronze snake on a pole, and He told the people that if they looked up at that snake on a pole, they would be healed. Those that believed this word from God and looked up at that snake on a pole were indeed healed. They had faith in God's remedy, even if it did not seem to make any sense. Jesus then said: **"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life"** (John 3:14-15). So, it is necessary for us to believe and trust in God's promise of eternal life through the suffering and death of Christ on the cross. **"He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him"** (John 3:36).

Death stares everyone in the face. It seems that no one can escape from death. But here is Jesus' promise that He wants us to trust in, to believe, to rely on, to depend on: **"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die"** (John 11:25-26).

Notice that before there can be faith, there must be a promise from God to have faith in. Faith does not hang on thin air. It has to have something to trust in – some person or some word. The apostle Paul writes: **"How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? ... So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God"** (Romans 10:14-15, 17). So also in his letter to the Christians in Ephesus Paul writes: **"In Him (Christ) you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation"** (Ephesians 1:13).

Questions

1. What are some other words that mean about the same thing as the word "faith"?
2. What promise did God give Abraham?
3. What was Abraham's reaction to this promise of God?
4. What did God say about Abraham's faith?
5. How did Abraham demonstrate his faith?
6. What illustration did Jesus use to explain the nature of faith?
7. How can faith help us when we are faced with death?
8. What must there be before there can be faith?