

# CHRISTIAN BASICS

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## *Study Five*

# CALLED TO BELIEVE

From the earliest days of the Christian Church, the people of God have been aptly described as 'believers', or 'those who believed' (Acts 2:44; 5:14; I Tim. 4:12). All of the notable men and women who went before them in Old Testament times made their mark by deeds of faith (Heb. 11). Abraham's life is the story of his faith, and from him arose a nation which owed its existence to faith in God (Isa. 7:9; 30:15).

The characteristic words for faith or belief in Hebrew (*aman*) and Greek (*pistis*) convey the idea of trust or confidence, and in a passive sense, fidelity, faithfulness, steadiness. Faith in God is simply trust in a God who is faithful.

## FAITH IS AN ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

It can be seen that faith has to do with the nature of God as seen by man and therefore is of central significance. Without faith it is impossible to please God. The basis of all relating with God is that men accept God's existence and his goodness (Heb. 11:2,6) and hope in his steadfast love (Ps. 147:11). In one sense the whole duty of man is that he believe (in the one sent by God. John 6:29). In so doing he acknowledges the truth about God who richly furnishes him with everything to enjoy, and the truth about himself as a dependent creature who sets his hope on that which is certain (I Tim. 6:17).

## THE OBJECT OF FAITH

Faith can never be thought of as a human characteristic apart from its object. It is essentially a way of relating to the object of faith. God said that he chose Israel to know and believe him (Isa. 43:10). The disciples of Christ not only believed on him but knew him, and through him the Father as well (John 14:7–11). Believing and knowing are virtually equated; or perhaps believing is the way of knowing. It is not said that Jesus believed in his Father, but that he knew him. The relationship between Father & Son was such that it would have been redundant to say he believed in his Father. It is interesting that believers are not said to believe in the Holy Spirit but to know him (John 14:15–17).

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When men were inclined to loosely believe in Jesus because he fed them, Jesus said they did not seek him because they saw signs (John 6:26). Obviously they had seen the mighty work, and in fact tasted it, and believed that Jesus was responsible for it. But the sign pointed to the person of Jesus, and they had not seen that.

### GROUNDS FOR FAITH

In one sense, everything that exists is a ground for faith. 'The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.' (Ps. 19:1). 'The earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord'. (Ps. 33:5). Jesus appealed to this understanding of creation in his own teaching on faith (Matt. 6:25–33).

But through rebellion, man has become blind to this natural revelation. Therefore, in numerous other ways God spoke to Israel by the prophets (Heb. 1:1). This includes the whole history of Israel as well as the prophecies that explain that history (For example: Isa. 41:21–24; 44:8). Then he spoke by a Son. The whole life of Jesus, his death and resurrection, followed by the story of how the church grew and the explanation of the apostles concerning all that had happened, become the grounds for a Christian's belief.

At each stage, the revelation is entirely adequate to inspire faith. Jesus remonstrated with two disciples because they were slow to believe what the prophets had written (Luke 24:25) and with Philip because he did not recognise the Father in the Son (John 14:9). Likewise, those who cannot see the validity of the apostolic testimony are guilty of neglect (Heb. 2:1–4).

So the Christian faith is based on factual data which can be explored. It is not an esoteric religion (secretly inward) or one that depends on the visions of its founder (as with Islam and Mormonism).

### FAITH INVOLVES THE WHOLE PERSON

However, it is clear that these revelations do not provide an overwhelming evidence in scientific terms to prove that God exists or that he has spoken. If they did, man's response would be coldly logical, inevitable or automatic. God's glory would have overwhelmed man's capacity to make a moral choice. As it is, God comes to man as Person to person, and truth is met with truth (John 4:23; Acts 17:27), and out of that encounter, man believes.

The call of God to man arises from his sovereignty and love and foreknowledge and action. Therefore, one can appreciate that it must appeal to the total person for a response. Man's whole rational process is involved. Jesus urged the Jews to believe in the light while he was still with them (John 12: 35f.—referring to the fact of his presence and actions). He admired the understanding (and faith) of a Roman centurion (Matt. 8:8–10). He told men to seek and find (Luke 1:9), and particularly, to search the Scriptures (Matt. 22:29). No man of himself seeks after God (Rom. 3:11), but because man was made to seek, he is enabled to seek. God does not by-pass his own natural order. The gospel is made known to man with wisdom and insight (Eph. 1:9).

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Man's will and action are also fully involved in faith. He believes in his heart and confesses with his lips (Matt. 10:32; Rom. 10:9). He asks: 'What shall we do?' (Acts 2:37, 16:30, 22:10), and is gladly baptised (Acts 8:37).

Because his faith is certain, he adds virtue, knowledge and temperance etc, to that faith showing that his calling by God is beyond doubt (II Pet. 1:3–11). All manner of good works flow from his faith (James 2:14–26) and God himself fulfils every good resolve and work of faith by his power making them worthy of his call (II Thess. 1:10–12).

Faith works by love (Gal. 5:6). The apostles' request for more faith (Luke 17:4f. in order to forgive others) was probably answered for Peter when he stood on a beach, saying: 'You know that I love you ' (John 21:17). He himself had been forgiven, so he loved, and had unbounded faith in Christ, and so could readily forgive others.

So Christian faith is based on truth, both factual and relational; and the discovery of God involves mind, emotion, and will—the whole person.

## FAITH IS HEARING

Faith reveals its validity in its action, but it begins as a hearing of faith (Gal. 3:2,5; Matt. 13:18–23), and must gratefully acknowledge that in regard to salvation, God will not share his glory with another. The practise of faith is essentially a matter involving humility and childlikeness (Ps. 61:1–4). It is not a human contribution to the accomplishment of the result but an agreement with the purpose and action of God. (John 1:13; Cf. Phil. 2:12f.). While faith depends wholly on the grace of God, man is called to co-operate totally with the operation of that grace.

God worked savingly for Israel and called them to enter into what he had provided (Exod. 14:13–15; Isa. 57:13). He worked in Christ to save man, and man enters into that by faith (Gal. 3:22; Heb. 6:12). God expresses the truth about his nature, by taking the initiative and calling man to enter gratefully and actively into participation with him (Ps. 73:25f.).

It can be seen from this what makes unbelief so wrong. When man is called to faith, God has already committed himself in loving action on man's behalf. To disbelieve is to spurn that love and call in question the whole character of God. (cf. Heb. 6:4–8).

## FAITH BY THE WORD OF GOD

God calls to man by his word and faith comes by hearing the word of God (Rom. 10:17). This word is not far off from man as though it were unattainable (vss. 6–8; cf. Deut. 30:11–14). If there is a problem, it is with man who does not want to hear what God is saying and tries to destroy that knowledge (Rom. 1:18–21).

So man's faith (or participation in God's action grows around the word of God. Mary, the mother of Jesus made the classic statement of faith: 'Let it be so to me

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according to your word' (Luke 1:38). The good news must meet with faith in the hearers in order to be productive (Heb. 4:1–2). So faith involves recognition of the preaching of the gospel as the word of God. (I Thess. 2:13).

Any exercise of faith that goes wider than what God has said he will do is in fact self confidence or peer-group pleasing. Faith is not mere positive thinking, but an obedient and grateful response to what God says he will do. Therefore, men of faith will constantly seek to know the will and purpose of God. (Acts 17:11; James 4:13–17).

### **FAITH BY THE MIGHTY ACTS OF GOD**

On numerous occasions, Jesus made it plain that people were healed of their diseases or raised from death because of faith (Matt. 9:18,22,29,15:28; Luke 7:9,50, 8:48, 18:42; Also Acts 3:16). He also said he could do no mighty works at Nazareth because of their lack of faith (Matt. 13:58). While it is true that the miracles were granted to faith, it is also clear that they had a powerful function in inspiring faith (John 2:11, 4:53, 11:48). There are many levels of faith, some of which are artificial and quickly fade (Matt. 13:18–23; John 6:60–75, 8:31–47), but others that readily respond to the stimulus of signs and teaching (John 6:66–71). Likewise there are different forms of unbelief, some that simply lack knowledge (John 9:35–38) and others that attribute God's works to Satan (Matt. 12:24). The miracles of Jesus are really only of benefit to those who are disposed to believe, and so do believe either at the time of the sign or at a later time when its significance is apparent (John 20:30f.).

The greatest miracle of Jesus' life was his resurrection, and that was not because of anyone's faith. But because of the resurrection, every Christian's faith is grounded in God's own action (I Pet. 1:21).

### **FAITH & EFFECTIVE CALLING**

Although the word of God or truth comes to all men, it is those who do what is true that come to the light (John 3:21), and those who are 'of the truth' that hear God's voice (18:37). That is, some have a predisposition to faith and others to unbelief; faith is not a happening that is dependent on certain chance conditions at the time of hearing, but arises from a prior action of God with the person. Jesus said that everyone who heard and learned from the Father came to him (John 6:45) and told Peter that his belief in the Messiah was revealed to him by the Father (Matt. 16:17). Later again Jesus said, in his prayer, that it was those that the Father gave to him that received his word (John 17:6). These came to the Son because they were drawn (John 6:44).

From this it follows that man is so incredibly lost and blind that it is only by a free gift of grace and faith that man can be saved (Eph. 2:8f.). It is clear that the whole salvation process must have its roots in the electing love of God. Those who are elect believe (Acts 13:48), and those chosen from the beginning to be saved, are called through the gospel, and set apart by the Spirit, and they believe (II Thess. 2:13f. and 1:10f.). It is appropriate that Paul thanked God for the Thessalonians' growing faith (II Thess. 1:3) because it was a gift of God. This faith is secure

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because none can be plucked from Christ's hand (John 10:28f.) and when aware that Satan desires to test a believer Christ prays for him that his faith may not fail (Luke 22:31f.).

### THE IGNITING OF FAITH

Whatever reasons a person may have for believing in God or coming to Jesus Christ, there is always a turning point at which the conviction turns from something general to something personal and specific. In other words, a person comes to believe that they themselves are the subject of God's grace. One leper said: 'Lord, if you will, you can make me clean' (Matt. 8:2; Luke 5:12). There was hesitancy as to whether Jesus would do what he could do. A full orb'd faith would see that the grace of God reached to him, but Christ encouraged his faith and simply said, 'I will. Be clean'.

People must be encouraged therefore to look at the nature of God rather than their own nature. Caleb and Joshua had this confidence in God (Num. 14:7–8) as did the psalmist (Ps. 130:7f.). John says: 'If our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God' (I John 3:21). In order to 'draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith', our hearts must be 'sprinkled clean from an evil conscience'. (Heb. 10:22).

### THE NATURE OF FAITH

'Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (Heb. 11:1). By its very nature, it does not require to see before believing (II Corin. 5:7; I Peter 1:8). It's confidence is rooted in the nature of God rather than in the probability of the occurrence (Rom. 4:18–21).

Jonathan said that God could save by many or by few (I Sam. 14:6). David felt the same before Goliath (I Sam 17:36–47). Other Judean kings had a like faith (Asa: II Chron. 14:11, Jehoshaphat: 20:1–19, and Hezekiah: 32:1–8).

Therefore the man of faith is not quickly shaken by adverse circumstances because his joy and security are derived from a different source (Ps. 4:6–8, 112:7f.). Not even death can threaten true faith (Job 13:15f; Dan. 3:17–18). Many other examples may be read (Job 19:25–27; Ps. 57:1–3; Jer. 17:7f.; Hab. 3:17–19; Rom. 8:38f.; II Corin. 4:16–18; Phil. 1:20; II Thess. 1:4; II Tim. 1:12; Heb. 10:34).

Faith makes it possible to dismiss wrongful pressures from other people (Ps. 40:3f.), because our trust is not in them (Ps. 62:5) or ourselves (Jer. 10:23).

All things come within the range of possibility (Matt. 17:18–20, 19:26; Mark 9:23f., 11:22–24; Luke 17:6; Phil. 4:13), even the resurrection of the dead (John 11:25–27). If anything depended on man it could never be guaranteed, so justification 'depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed . . . .' (Rom. 4:16).

Faith can be very small, yet still effective (Luke 17:6). Sarah is one such case (Gen. 18:12–15; Heb. 11:11).

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Because everything depends on faith (which is to say, on God it is ridiculous to think of one man being more important than another (James 2:1; II Pet. 1:1).

The nature of faith has great significance in regard to our acceptance with God, as already noted. By faith we are made righteous. Therefore faith is contrasted to works (Rom. 9:31–33, 10:6–10; Heb. 4:10), and law (Gal. 3:11f.), as a means of justification. By the law, God revealed to man his great sinfulness, so that everything may be made dependent on faith (Gal. 3:22).

Therefore a justified man will walk by the Spirit and not the flesh (Rom. 8:4–7) and see every one from a faith point of view (II Corin. 5:16). What he sees with his eyes, or can do by himself, are quite secondary considerations.

### **FAITH A SETTLED CONVICTION**

It is quite apparent that faith may be small or great, and that it may go through periods of elevation and depression. The faith of Abraham lapsed for a number of years. However for faith to be small or for it to rise and fall is for man to say that God is small or that he rises and falls.

Therefore it is not right that faith has these fluctuations. James says a double minded man will not receive anything from the Lord (James 1:6; Cf. Heb. 10:37–39). The person who keeps his mind on the Lord is kept in perfect peace, 'for the Lord God is an everlasting rock' (Isa. 26:3f.). Jesus said that if a man did not doubt in his heart but believed what he said would come to pass it would be done for him (Mark 11:23). Paul stood on a sinking boat and announced that no lives would be lost. An angel of God had stood by him the previous night (Acts 27:25).

It is necessary to caution however against 'whipping up' a faith, more accurately described as self-confidence or deception. Such an expectation is usually unsettled and unsettling. If one does not find a healthy and restful confidence in God rooted in One's mind, it is best to admit this (Mark 9:24; Luke 17:5) and ask for an increased faith. Faith is fostered by waiting on God (Ps. 27:14, 31:24) and remembering the things he has done (Deut. 8:2; Matt. 16:8–11).

True faith leads to joy and strength (Ps. 5:11, 40:4; Prov. 14:26; Isa. 30:15) and security in trouble (Ps. 9:10, 34:22, 36:7). It makes anxiety unnecessary (Matt. 6:25–30). Such faith does not become alarmed (I Pet. 3:6; II Chron. 20:20). It is a shield (Eph. 6:16) and a breastplate (I Thess. 5:8), and abounds in thanks giving (Col. 2:7).

### **THE SCENE OF BATTLE**

It is essential that faith be lived out in a state of tension—this is the battle of all creation and victory here overcomes the world (I John 5:4). Israel lived this out in a political arena where her enemies frequently were more numerous and powerful than herself, where the people of God quavered with fear, and in which they were called to understand that God was above all such enemies (Eg. Isa. 7:1–9).

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This is the battle of the world because the issue at stake is the very nature and person of God as seen by his creation. All of the rebellion of man focuses in his unbelieving denial that God is who he says he is, and can do what he says he can do. (Heb. 3:12–4:11).

Therefore the faith of God's people is tested (I Pet. 1:7–9). They are asked to wait (Ps. 119:1–8). But in waiting and in trial, they are made steadfast, lacking in nothing (James 1:2–4) and as the reward of their faith they receive the salvation of their souls (I Pet. 1:9).

The goal of faith is not in this age because we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken (Heb. 12:28). For those who desire that better country, God is not ashamed to be called their God (Heb. 11:16).

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