

## Faith

Mark 1:15, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

**Question:** What is faith?

**Key Passages:** James 2:17-18, 21-22, 25.

### Faith as a Feeling

In our previous study we asked a simple question, “What is the Gospel.” We determined that it was not merely a body of doctrine related to Jesus’ death. Rather, it was an affirmation of the good news that Jesus is our king. The Jews identified this role as *Messiah*, the Romans as *Emperor*, but the point is the same. The good news is that the King of Kings now rules the world. It is our obligation to make that ultimate inevitability and living reality.

This lesson is tightly bound to the previous one: “What is faith.” *Faith* and the *Gospel* are close cousins since the Gospel is the object of our belief. Just as *Gospel* need a sharper focus, so too does faith. Why? Because over time, we’ve drifted from the first century culture and context and imposed some foreign freight to faith—what it is and how it is expressed. To many and for far too long, faith has been reduced to mental assent. I believe in the claims of Jesus, therefore, I am a disciple. That’s not necessarily the case. A rational realization that Jesus died for our sins and rose from the dead does not always translate into a life transformed or an eternity secured. Now, to be clear, there’s nothing wrong with belief; there’s just not enough right with it. Biblical faith exceeds belief. This was the pinch felt by Søren Kierkegaard. He was a Dutch philosopher frustrated by the dead orthodoxy of his Lutheran heritage. He knew that knowing was not enough. There had to be a heart, a devotion, a loyalty to the God of Israel above and beyond the doctrine of a denomination. For Kierkegaard, there was a gap between the doctrine he believed and the mystical presence of God he craved. He bridged the gap “a leap in the dark” that became his definition of faith.

Kierkegaard touched a nerve. An entire generation latched on to this idea that faith was “a leap in the dark” into a relationship with God that was vibrant, mystical, and meaningful. In fact, his generation bred a lineage of theologians who, to this day, have dominated the western landscape. Some identify faith as mere emotion, feeling our way to the truth. Others lean more into thinking right doctrine as evidence of our faith. Both of these have been turned against Christians as a reason for rejecting the church. “Oh, that’s what you believe,” as if it is unfounded feelings. Or, “You have your faith and I have mine,” as if both are equally compelling because both are personally and internally fabricated. Rationalism equates faith to right thinking. Existentialists equate it to personal experience. Both have compelling but incomplete perspectives. Biblical faith is deeper than either and both.

## Faith as Fidelity

There is no reason to allow either rationalists or existentialists to hijack biblical faith. We can eavesdrop on a first century Jewish conversation to sharpen our focus on faith. Flavius Josephus was a Jewish aristocrat roughly contemporaneous with the Apostle Paul. He became a General in the Jewish Revolt against the Romans. His first skirmish was against Vespasian (who was destined to become the next Emperor). Josephus was badly beaten and subject to Vespasian's discretion. We may never know just exactly how the conversation went but the result was that Vespasian decided to utilize Josephus for propaganda rather than a quick execution.

Over the course of the next few decades, Josephus penned two books that are the most reliable sources of the Jewish period. His first, *Wars of the Jews*, was a deliberate attempt to persuade his fellow countrymen that the Romans were tools in God's hand not spawn of Satan. His second book, *Antiquities of the Jews*, was propaganda aimed in the opposite direction. Here he tried to persuade the Romans that the Jews they just conquered were God's children under discipline, not rebels to be abused. These historical records, though certainly perspectival, are among the best eyewitness sources for the critical events surrounding Jerusalem's demise.

In his autobiography, he records an account that is a near mirror image of Mark 1:15, using almost identical verbiage. The year was 66 AD. The rebellion was about to begin and a number of factions were vying for power. Josephus was sent from Jerusalem to Galilee to speak with some rebel leaders. One nefarious opponent, who (confusingly) was named "Jesus", was contracted to kill Josephus. Josephus learned of his plot and thwarted it. Rather than destroying Jesus (the rebel), he attempted to turn him. Here is Josephus in his own words: "I then called Jesus to me by himself, and told him, that I was not a stranger to that treacherous design he had against me, nor was I ignorant by whom he was sent for; that, however, I would forgive him what he had done already, if he would **repent of it, and be faithful to me** hereafter," (Josephus, *Life*, 110). Josephus offered the rebel a chance to alter his destiny by transferring his loyalties. That is a pretty good summary of faith.

The words "repent" and "be faithful" are the same words found in Mark 1:15. Josephus was *not* telling Jesus (the rebel) to feel sorry about what he had done. He was not calling him to a higher moral path. He wasn't even asking him to lay down his weapons. On the contrary, he was telling him to change course. He was challenging him to transfer loyalties from the rebels to him! From that starting point, we can understand with greater clarity Jesus' own call. First, his call to repentance was not to feel sorry. This is *not* a walk-down-the-aisle moment; it is a long-term commitment to shift allegiance to a new master. Second, Jesus was not inviting them to lay down their weapons or aggressions. Rather, he was inviting them to bring them along with all the aspirations they represent and offer them to the service of God through following Jesus Christ. Third, faith is not what he called us to believe. It was a pledge of allegiance he was asking us to promise. Faith is fidelity. It is loyalty and commitment. Anything less is retarded.

Finally, as Josephus called Jesus (the rebel) to show loyalty to him, Jesus (the Christ) calls us to pledge allegiance to the Gospel, which is embodied in him. He is the Good News. He is the new Emperor and King. As every soldier, husband, or even Frat brother knows the weight of a pledge. The power of a pledge is in the life that it absorbs.

### **Fidelity as Obedience**

This is where so many theologians get nervous. When we start talking about adding obedience to faith it feels like we are claiming to be saved by works not “faith alone.” Their concern is duly noted. After all, the single greatest difference between Christianity and *all other religions* is the fact that God saved us rather than us working to save ourselves. Correctly understood, however, obedience is not added to faith; it is a genetic part of fidelity. Again, let’s be clear. We are not saying that obedience saves us. We’re not even saying that obedience validates our faith as if it confirms adequate intensity of our belief. We are, rather, asserting that faith means fidelity. Faith is not belief; it is loyalty. Obedience is the expression of loyalty, not the proof of it. Our “works” are inevitable expressions of the fidelity we pledge of our king. Nowhere is this more clearly stated than Jesus own brother James (2:17-18), “So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” James goes on to give two examples of people who lived a life of loyalty (i.e. faith). Abraham, the father of faith, demonstrated by his obedience that he truly believed God. “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works,” (James 2:21-22). Abraham was a good man; Tamar was a not-so-good woman. Yet her faith was likewise verified when she shifted loyalty to Israel from her fellow pagan in Jericho. “And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?” (James 2:25).

In no way does this mean that Abraham earned his salvation by keeping the law. In fact, Abraham is the very example Paul used to prove we are *not* saved by the rules we keep. “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’” (Romans 4:2-3). This Galatians 2:16, “Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.”

Neither James nor Paul would discount works; they both insist, however, that works are in the right place. Every time works are located in “the Law” they precede salvation. As an attempt to earn God’s grace they fail. However, when good works are “In Christ” they flow out of God’s free gift of salvation. Paul would say “We were created in Christ Jesus for good works”

(Eph 2:10). This statement punctuates Paul's greatest description of salvation as "grace through faith." Good works "in Christ" are not only appropriate, they are inevitable and therefore, essential to Christian fidelity.

In fact, every time the final judgment is described in the New Testament, our works are what is judged since they are the tangible/visible expression of our fidelity. **Jesus** said it first: "Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment," (John 5:28-29). The Apostle **Paul** confirms what Jesus said, "He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury," (Romans 2:6-8). **Peter**, the other great Apostle concurs, "And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile," (1 Peter 1:17). **John** concludes Revelation with the same affirmation, "And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done," (Revelation 20:12).

There is a simple litmus test whether your works are "in Christ" or "in the law." Do they flow from your salvation or are they an attempt to gain salvation? Do you ask, "Is this all I can do?" Or do you ask, "Do I need to do anything else?" Those who ask about the minimum requirements of Christianity are still in the mindset of legalism. Those who seek perpetual service of the Master are entrenched in grace.

**Key Points:**

- Faith is neither rationalistic belief nor existential experience (a leap in the dark).
- Faith (same Greek word as "belief") should be read as "fidelity" or "loyalty".
- Obedience (or "good works") is not a means of earning salvation but an inevitable expression of allegiance by those who have been saved.

**Action Step:** Watch a patriotic film such as *The Patriot*, *A Few Good Men*, or *First Avenger* and ask how "faith" would be defined through that movie.

**Further Resources:** Matthew Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone* (2017).