

Is faith a form of work?
A Series on What does Faith Mean: Part 8

Can this question be answered through biblical hermeneutics?

Based on an understanding of the Hebrew terms from which the English translation is “faith” is derived (see the article: What is the concept of “faith” in the Old Testament at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/9Salvation/FaithOTConcept.aspx), faith is a) the belief that God is real and true, and b) engendering a trust in Him and His words. In other words, faith is founded on truth certain of a real God and placing a trust in the absolute reality of His words.

This understanding can be seen in both the Old and New Testament.

	Old Testament	New Testament
Context	God is silent for 400 years	God is silent for 400 years
Evidence that God is objectively a real Being	The miracles of the Exodus	The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
How people are reminded of the historical event that was evidence of the real existence of God.	The Ten Commandments would open with "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Ex 20:2), and the Ten Commandments would be recited often.	The Gospel always mentions the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Rom 10:8-10)

This understanding carries through for those who did not personally witness the above works of God.

But what does it say? “THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, IN YOUR MOUTH AND IN YOUR HEART”—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. (Rom 10:8-10) ... However, they did not all heed the good news; for Isaiah says, “LORD, WHO HAS BELIEVED OUR REPORT?” So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. (Rom 10:16-17)

Today’s culture prefers to understand that faith is “believing without seeing,” without any context, to infer that faith is subjective and blind. This is not so in biblical faith. While one may not have witnessed the works of God, faith is not blind but based on the recognition of objective fact. A Believer does not need to personally witness the works of God to know that God is real and that His words and promises are trustworthy.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Heb 11:1)

Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord— for we walk by faith, not by sight (2 Cor 5:7)

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Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls. (1 Pet 1:3-9)

When the writers of the New Testament speak of “works” in the context of faith, they are describing one’s efforts to comply with the Law of Moses. There is a distinction between faith and works, and their words do not indicate that faith is a form of work.

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from **works of the Law**. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one. (Rom 3:21-30)

We are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles; nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be **justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law**; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified. (Gal 2:15-16)

This is the only thing I want to find out from you: **did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?** Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the **works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?** (Gal 3:2-5)

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a **result of works**, so that no one may boast. (Eph 2:8-9)

Here Paul is speaking to salvation, God’s gift of grace, which is available to those who have faith; salvation is not achievable through human effort.

The Jewish thought on works finds its basis in God’s covenant with Moses and the nation of Israel.

Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you to Myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.” (Ex 19:3-6)

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The events of the Exodus establish the historically real and live existence of the invisible God, the God of Abraham, Maker of heaven and earth. His omnipotence demands obedience, "now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine." (Ex 19:5)

However the Jews focused on obedience to the Law, and, in so doing, made the Law the basis of salvation. Rather than placing their faith in the invisible God, the One who was real and alive, they preferred to worship inanimate idols while still practicing the Law.

Moses, in his final words, wanted to make sure that the faith of future generations was properly placed upon the true concept of God. Obedience to the Law was mentioned after the imperative of recognizing the One true omnipotent God and fearing to disobey Him.

Assemble the people, the men and the women and children and the alien who is in your town, so that they may hear and learn and fear the Lord your God, and be careful to observe all the words of this law. Their children, who have not known, will hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, as long as you live on the land which you are about to cross the Jordan to possess." (Deut 31:12-13)

In similar manner, Joshua placed an emphasis on believing in placing a trust in the One true God.

"Now, therefore, fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Josh 24:14-15)

The admonishment is carried into the New Testament when Paul speaks to Jews about their misplaced faith in the Law. If the Jews had a genuine faith in God, they would have recognized that Jesus was God's Son and placed a trust in His words. For their misplaced faith, Jesus was their stumbling stone.

What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, just as it is written,

"Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense,
And he who believes in Him will not be disappointed." (Rom 9:30-33)

The problem of believing in the incorrect concept of the One true God can be seen today. While both Jews and Muslims believe in the real existence of the God of Abraham, they do not recognize His Son Jesus Christ nor the triune nature of God Himself.

Another problem related to faith is seen through the lives of the apostles. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah and placed a trust in His words; but, their concept of Him changes after the resurrection. No longer is Jesus the military savior of the Jews (Luke 22:21), He is instead the savior of mankind (Luke 24:44-48). Doubting Thomas is significant for stating the association "my Lord and my God" (John 20:28).

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In view of Jesus' great command of loving "the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt 22:37), the disciples displayed a love that could be described as "phileo" before the resurrection and afterwards as "agape."

How the apostles lived their lives and viewed themselves after the resurrection of Christ contrasted sharply with their attitudes before.

Both Paul and James felt strongly that one with a genuine faith in God would be obliged to be obedient to His words and live accordingly. Faith was not a form of work; rather, it was the basis of complying to God's moral standard.

For Paul, this obligation was a question of obedience. He called living righteously as "obedience of faith" (Rom 1:5; 15:18; 16:19, 26), and Peter called these Believers as "children of obedience" (1 Pet 1:14).

For James, one's efforts of living righteously demonstrated how genuine one's faith was.

What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. But someone may well say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God. You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. (James 2:14-26)

With a good biblical hermeneutic study on the terms "faith" and "works," the use of the term "work" is limited to the works of the Law and not ever used in the context of referring to one's decision to believe that God is objectively true and placing a trust in His words. Nor does the Bible ever indicate that "faith" is supernaturally bestowed on a non-Believer; the Hebrew terms from which "faith" is translated do not allow even the slightest suggestion of that.