

# Faith and How It Works

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When a friend, family member, or brother is facing some serious problem or stressful situation, we may tell them, “Just have faith. It will all work out.” But what is faith? How do we acquire it? How does it work (within us)?

In the New Testament, the word translated “faith” is the Greek work *pistis*. Strong’s Expanded Dictionary of Bible Words says, “Faith means trust, confidence, assurance, and belief.” It is the word used in Heb. 11:1, “Now faith (*pistis*) is the assurance of things hoped for (but not yet received), the conviction (in our hearts and minds) of things not seen (the invisible spiritual things, e.g. God).

Many use the words faith and belief interchangeably and, while they are generally synonymous, there is a difference between the two. The only time belief is used in the New Testament is in 2 Thess. 2:13, where it is translated from *pistis*; belief (and its verb from believe) carry a different shade of meaning than faith. Writing about what we call a “dead faith,” James says, “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder” (Jas. 2:19)! This demonstrates that you can have a belief in something (in this case, God), but not have faith (trust) in Him.

So, how do we acquire faith? Humans operate on a belief system. A belief is a decision based on evidence presented to us and then evaluated carefully. Let me see if I can illustrate this. I move to a new city. Soon thereafter, my car needs some work and I set out to find a good mechanic. I ask members of the church and they suggest a name. I might do a Google search for reviews. Finally, I have enough information (evidence) to believe he can do the job. Do I have faith (trust) in him? Not yet – he hasn’t demonstrated that he can do the job. The first time I take my car to him, there may be a belief that he can do the job based on evidence presented, but there is still a certain amount of risk involved. After the job is completed on time and on budget, I begin to develop faith in him. He has demonstrated that he can be trusted. Each time I return to him for work on my car (it’s an old car in need of much work), and he continues the same level of excellence, my faith in him grows.

Faith in God and His word operates on the same principles; there are no special rules. We may be searching for something to fill a nagging void in our lives. Someone tells us about God and His word. Since Jesus died about 2,000 years ago, we do not have the same privilege of seeing His works or hearing His words as those who walked with Him; we “see” and “hear” them through the faithful records of the gospel writers. We evaluate what they say and investigate it ourselves. In their writings, we hear Jesus’ wonderful words of love and hope. In them, we see Jesus affirm His words by His marvelous deeds. Through them, we develop the faith that Jesus is who He says He is: the Son of God. We have arrived to a point of having faith in God, just as Paul states,

“Faith comes by hearing... the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). We build our faith in God by building our relationship with Him through study, prayer, and meditation.

OK, so now we have acquired faith in God. Now what? Nowhere in the Scriptures is there contemplated a stagnate or inactive faith. Faith leads you to action. In the passage from James mentioned above, James begins a contrast between simple belief and living, active faith. He continues in verses 20-22 to give the example of Abraham, “Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? 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.” In the Genesis account of this, after the angel of the Lord prevented Abraham from harming Isaac, he said, “for now I know that you fear God...” Active, saving faith, then, is not simply a matter of acknowledging something that you accept to be true, it is doing something with it. Faith involves the entire person – body, soul, and spirit – embracing the truth with the mind, heart, and will.

This concept is often illustrated with a story drawn from the exploit of the 19th Century daredevil Clifford Calverley. In 1992, Calverley pushed a wheelbarrow over a tightrope stretched across Niagara Falls. He turned to the audience gathered there and asked, “Now that you’ve seen what I can do, do you believe I can do it again?” The crowd enthusiastically answered, “Yes!” “Do you think I can do it with another person in the wheelbarrow?” “YES!” Calverley then issued a challenge, “Well then. Who wants to climb in?”

What is faith? It is trust, assurance, and confidence in God and Jesus Christ. A living, active, saving faith is not just believing that God exists; sometimes it means getting into the wheelbarrow.