

# Chain Reference: Faith

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## Introduction.

- A. Among the most widely misunderstood concepts in the entire Christian lexicon is the concept of faith. There are literally thousands of years of competing theologies that have irreparably confused the issue for many throughout the world. Here's a quick summary. During the medieval era, the Catholic Church taught that salvation was attainable through works of merit performed under the offices of the Church. In other words, provided you did what the pope told you to, you could earn your way to heaven. The most extreme expression of this idea appeared in the sale of indulgences. The idea here was that the merit of a monetary contribution to the Church could cancel out the demerit of a later sin if the contribution was large enough.
- B. In practice, this meant that the lords of the Church ended up selling what were essentially licenses to sin whenever the Church needed money. This didn't sit well with many people, among them, a young German monk named Martin Luther. Luther was so revolted by the spectacle that he proposed a radically different theology in which faith only, without reference to works of any sort, was the sole basis of salvation. Luther's teaching has proved enormously influential ever since. For instance, when many in the denominational world oppose baptism for the forgiveness of sins, they do so because of Luther's doctrine of faith only.
- C. Now, this is just a very brief summary, but it illustrates how badly tangled the world's understanding of faith has become. The only way we can untangle it is through the word of God, which makes this, once again, a fit subject for one of our chain-reference studies. Here's the way they work: On some blank page in the back of your Bible, write the word "Faith." Next to it, write Hebrews 11:1, because that will be our first Scripture this evening. Once we get to Hebrews 11:1 and finish looking at it, in the margin next to it, write Romans 10:17, which is going to be the second Scripture. If you continue this process faithfully through the sermon, you'll have an eight-verse study you can go through with anyone, a chain reference on faith.

## I. Basics of Faith.

- A. This study has to begin, as we said earlier, with **Hebrews 11:1**. Write Hebrews 11:1 down next to "Faith" in the back of your Bible, if you haven't already, then turn with me to the passage so we can read it together. This passage is the classic definition of faith. It tells us that faith is the belief that something we have not seen ourselves is true anyway. This sort of belief is anathema to many in the scientific community. Like Thomas, they refuse to accept anything they have not perceived with their own senses. Nonetheless, faith in God is essential to Christianity because, obviously, none of us have seen God, yet believe in Him anyway.
- B. Even though this belief is not based on sensory perception, it is neither blind nor irrational. In fact, we see the source of our faith described in **Romans 10:17**. As I mentioned earlier, this is our second Scripture for the evening, so write it down in the margin of your Bibles next to Hebrews 11:1, then turn to it with me. It tells us that the origin of our faith is the word of God. This is important for a number of reasons. First of all, it shows that our faith is a sensible faith to hold. We commonly believe things on the basis of eyewitness testimony. For instance, I have never seen Julius Caesar, but I nonetheless believe that he was a great Roman general who conquered France 2000 years ago because I have read a book that purports to be his own account of his military campaigns, and I find the record of that book credible. Friends, the documentary evidence for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is far, far better than for the campaigns of Caesar, even though they both lived about the same time. If it is reasonable to believe the one, it is reasonable to believe the other.
- C. Second, though, this tells us that faith in Christ arises from the same everyday process as faith in Caesar. We consider the evidence and decide that it is credible. There's nothing mystical about it. However, many so-called Christian groups teach something quite different. They say that read as we might, we will never believe the Bible until we are anointed by the Holy Spirit. Folks, that's not what this text says. It doesn't say "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word and the Holy Spirit." Instead, it quite clearly says that the word by itself is enough to produce faith. There isn't a passage in the Bible that teaches that the direct operation of the Holy Spirit is what produces faith. Instead, all we have to do to come to faith is study with a sincere heart.
- D. We see the components of this reasonable faith described in **Hebrews 11:6**. This is the next passage in line, so write it down in the margin next to Romans 10:17, and then turn with me to it. Here, the Scripture teaches that faith does not merely believe that God is, but also that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. This is an important idea, brethren. A lot of our friends and neighbors want to get us to believe that faith is just the first part of this verse. They want us to reduce faith to mental assent without any active component whatsoever. If we just look at this verse for a little bit, we quickly come to see that faith without action is impossible. If we believe that God is the rewarder of those who seek Him, it must also be true that God is NOT the rewarder of those who don't seek Him. The Bible very clearly lays out what God's rewards and

punishments are, so if we have faith, the only reason why we would not diligently seek God is if we have chosen to embrace the torments of hell rather than the joys of heaven. Faith therefore involves action.

- E. It is this kind of active, God-seeking faith that gives us our salvation. Look at Paul's words on the subject in **Ephesians 2:8-9**. Write that passage down next to Hebrews 11:6, then turn to it with me, if you would. This passage, friends, describes the way that every Christian has ever been saved or ever will be saved, through faith that God is and is the rewarder of those who seek Him. As we look at this passage, though, we need to understand what Paul means when he says that this salvation is apart from works. This doesn't mean that we don't have to try to obey God to be saved. Instead, Paul is referring back to the system of justification under the Law of Moses. Under the Law, righteousness was based on perfect law-keeping. A man could be justified by his works and boast in his own holiness only if he painstakingly kept the smallest details of the Law and never sinned. When Paul says that our salvation is by grace through faith and not by works, he simply means that because of the sacrifice of Christ, God does not expect us to keep His law perfectly. Instead, we are saved through belief in the power of Christ to justify us despite our sin, not through our own works.

## II. Nuances of Faith.

- A. However, none of this means that the man of faith does not have to obey the gospel. Indeed, the very opposite is true. We see this, among many other places, in **Romans 16:26**. Write that one down next to Ephesians 2:8-9, then turn to the passage with me. As this verse makes quite clear, Paul never once thought or wrote that faith doesn't have to do anything. Instead, to Paul, the ideas of faith and obedience were inextricably linked. This is just common sense. Let's say that we went down to Iowa, to some of those areas that have been hit so hard by flooding recently, and we get to talking with an old farmer about his experiences with the flooding. He tells us, "If I hadn't believed the sheriff when he came and told me the levee had broken, I would be dead now." We know what that means. We know that the old farmer didn't sit on his porch and watch the floodwaters come in while saying, "I believe the sheriff; I believe the sheriff" under his breath. Instead, because he believed the sheriff, he took the actions that the sheriff told him were necessary for him to save himself. Our faith works just the same way. If we truly believe, we will act to obey.
- B. This point is only emphasized by the teaching of **James 2:26**. Write James 2:26 down in the margin next to Romans 16:26, then turn with me so we can look at the Scripture together. This passage tells us that faith, when it is not combined with works, is dead. Interestingly enough, this is the only place in Scripture where the mental assent only so beloved of our denominational acquaintances is presented, and James by the Holy Spirit tells us it's useless. Some folks get bent out of shape about this passage, and about James 2 in general, and say that it contradicts Paul's teaching about faith and works. In reality, of course, that's not actually true. James here is using the word "works" in a different sense than Paul is. He's not talking about perfectly keeping the law of God. In fact, in the early part of James 2, James emphasizes how much we will need mercy at the judgment, precisely BECAUSE we don't keep the law of God perfectly. Instead, when James uses the word "works" here, he's simply referring to the obedience that faith logically and naturally produces. We don't have to do everything right to please God, but we do have to make the effort to live in a godly way and bear some fruit for God in our lives. If we aren't people of good works, our faith is actually useless and dead.
- C. Next in line, we learn that genuine faith does not fear. This idea is presented by the words of Jesus in **Mark 4:40**. Once again, write Mark 4:40 down in the margin next to James 2:26, then turn to the passage with me. This passage doesn't expose a problem with denominational false doctrine; it's just useful for teaching us what faith should be like. Notice that Jesus accuses the disciples of being fearful, and immediately attributes their fear to lack of faith. He expected their faith to reveal itself in what they did. The same thing is true for us too, friends. Satan loves to use fear to drive people away from God, whether they are Christians or not. He tries to get us to believe that the consequences of righteousness are just too severe to be faced. If we believe Satan in that, we show that we don't really believe that God is a rewarder of those who seek Him. By contrast, if we do have faith in the promises of God, we aren't worried about the consequences, because even if Satan's worst threats do come to pass (and they usually don't), God will replace what we have lost with something better. Genuine faith doesn't get caught up in weighing the costs and benefits of righteousness, because it knows the benefits will always be greater. Genuine faith does what's right without any fear.
- D. Finally, though, the Scripture teaches us that faith must always be steadfast. Look, for instance, at **Hebrews 10:38**. This will be our final Scripture for the evening, so scribble it down next to Mark 4:40, then turn to it together with me. Notice, once again, that faith isn't presented here as just mental assent to the idea that Jesus is our Savior. As this passage presents it, the opposite of living by faith isn't just refusing to believe in God. It's shrinking back to destruction. Both faith and lack of faith reveal themselves in action. Indeed, they both reveal themselves in our actions. If we have the faith of Hebrews 11, we won't just do what is right. We will continue to do what is right, and we will keep that up until our lives are over. If we ever quit, whether out of fear or apathy, this passage teaches quite clearly that God takes no pleasure in us. We won't somehow sneak into heaven because we had faith at one point. We will lose our souls, unless we persevere.

**Conclusion.** If you have faith and want to dedicate your life to Christ, there is no reason to wait. Come to Him now.