

# The Anatomy of Faith

- <sup>1</sup> Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.
- <sup>2</sup> For by it the people of old received their commendation.
- <sup>6</sup> ... And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

Hebrews 11:1-2, 6

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## Gross Anatomy

A COUPLE OF WEEKS AGO, my oldest daughter got her first of something gross. Finally it came, that long anticipated day when sugar and spice and everything nice gets to engage in that which mostly just the snakes and snails and puppy dog tails were looking forward to doing. It was Biology Class. Do you remember? They looked at its mouth, its tongue, its teeth. They found its glottis and

esophagus. They went to the eyes, the shoulder joints, the elbow joints, the wrist joints. They looked at its feet. They cut the skin. They used forceps, scalpels, and scissors to separate, cut, and hack. They saw how it digested its food with its liver, gallbladder, stomach, and intestines. They learned how it reproduced, jumped, and croaked. To some it sounds quite gross—**gross anatomy**.

The point of the anatomy was to learn as much about the frog as possible from its body, and in so doing learn more about themselves. Today I want to give you an **anatomy of faith**. Like the frog, we do this because we want to understand more about God and ourselves. But this is not gross, in the sense of disgusting. It is gross in the sense of looking at parts of the whole. We are not going to dissect “dead” faith or a dead God. The faith we are looking at is alive and has its source in the Living God who grants faith to us.

I can think of few subjects in Christianity that are more important to dissect. Why? **Hebrews 11:6** says, “**Without faith, it is impossible to please [God],**” a verse found just after our passage today. **Do you want to please God?** People live their whole lives desperate to please others. But how do

you please a holy God? Then you must have faith. But as so many people have terrible misunderstandings about faith, you need to understand what the word means—biblically speaking—if you want to truly have it impact and change your life. Now, you can have faith and not really understand it very well. Many people do. But Christian maturity, which is what Hebrews is all about, demands that you move on from a child-like understanding to a Christian adult thinking of faith. This is what it means to be a disciple. You no longer think like children. When our thoughts are aligned with God thoughts, this is when we begin to grow up.

What do I mean by **terrible misunderstandings**? Faith has been badly abused over the years. Here are some examples. Surely you have heard people talk about “**blind faith**.” The origin of the phrase probably comes from our passage. From the NIV, faith is the “**assurance of what we do not see**.” If you can’t see it, it can mean you are blind to it. Used in the bad way, people talk about blind faith in God as faith that is without evidence. For them, faith is irrational. It is illogical. People who try to tell you differently are going against the Scripture. You should have faith because belief

in God is absurd. Scientists know that belief in God is absurd, and that is why you should believe. For faith to really be faith, it must be blind. It needs to be a leap in the dark, otherwise, it isn't faith because you can somehow see it. That's the thinking, but it is a horrible misunderstanding of faith, and many people have it.

Another misunderstanding is the **object of faith**. Talking about the need to have "faith" is very popular in our culture, even among non-Christians. But too often faith is an end to itself. The object of faith *is faith*. As if were itself a substance or a thing you could go out and grab. As an example, the Word-of-Faith teacher **Kenneth Copeland** says that faith itself is a substance that "**has the ability to effect natural substance.**"<sup>1</sup> In other words, if you have faith, it can literally change your circumstances in life such as poor health, poor relationships, or simply being poor. It is like a medicine you take that automatically starts fighting all the diseases in your life. Faith is a thing that necessarily moves and changes other things. This is a completely non-Christian way of thinking about faith. In fact, it has deep roots in paganism. The reality

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Norman L. Geisler and Ron Rhodes, *When Cultists Ask: A Popular Handbook on Cultic Misinterpretations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 285.

is—since faith is not actually a substance—this thinking makes you the object of faith.

Another misunderstanding involves **the opposites of faith**. I say opposites (plural), as some may think that perhaps there is only one opposite. Our church hails from the tradition of the Protestant Reformation, which sought not to overthrow the Church, nor to say that there hadn't been a true church since the NT, but to Reform it. 500 years ago, the Western Church was sharply divided and the world has never been the same. The division came over many things, but at the heart of it was the question, “**How is a person saved?**” The Roman Church said and continues to say to this day that we are saved by faith through grace in Christ. **But not alone**. Not even close. Many more things are needed in order to finally reach the destination of heaven. Like the Jewish converts before them, these are heavy yokes placed around people's necks that are impossible to bear.

Into this, The Reformation said that we are justified **by faith alone**. Martin Luther said, “**If this article [of justification alone] stands, the church stands; if this article**

collapses, the church collapses.”<sup>2</sup> If we are saved by faith alone, then we can see that this is a terribly important topic, as it deals with the question of eternal life.

But if the Reformation made **works the opposite of faith**—as indeed the Bible does in many places—there is another opposite as well. Let’s return to this thought of blind faith. Some think sight is the opposite of being blind. As we will see, to believe only by sight is just as wrong headed as to believe in a blind faith. **The opposite of blind faith is not pure sight, but a reasonable faith** rooted in sure and certain hope. Both of these opposites are actually in our passage today.

With misunderstandings abounding, **how would you define faith?** This seems like a great place to start our dissection, especially given that along with vs. 6, which fuels our drive to get this right, we are looking at the first two verses in Hebrews 11. **“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation” (Heb 11:1-2).**

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<sup>2</sup> Referenced in Thomas R. Schreiner, *Faith Alone: What the Reformers Taught* (Zondervan: 2015), ch. 2 n. 20.

Together, these verses give us a good body to study the anatomy of faith.

## A Definition of “Faith”

Verse 1 is a good definition of faith. But it has to be rightly understood. Far too often, the verse is taken out of context. But this is not a proverb. It is part of a sustained argument in a letter that is focusing all of our attention upon the Son of God. First, let’s consider the context of the whole Bible. Faith is one of the most frequent words in New Testament. It occurs almost 250 times in the NT (the verbal form another 200). Lest you think that this is something that basically didn’t exist until Paul came along (and some do), James uses it 16 times, Peter a perfect 7 times, 24 times it is in the Gospels, and 47 (including the verbal form) in the LXX.<sup>3</sup> While this shows that it appears in the NT much more often than it does in the OT, it also shows that it is by no means absent in the OT.

This is a very important point. You must see that the NT is actually rooting faith explicitly in the OT. If this were not

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<sup>3</sup> There are 38 more if you include the Apocrypha which is part of the LXX.

true, then ours would not be the religion of the true God, since the OT is God's word to us about salvation. Jehoshaphat told Israel to "believe" in the LORD and be established" (2Ch 20:20). Nineveh "believed God" when Jonah preached (Jonah 3:5 LXX). Isaiah hears the Lord Jesus say, "Know and believe and understand that I am he: before me there was no other God" (Isa 43:10 LXX).

The reason the NT takes the doctrine and runs with it is because it sees that in the new covenant, because of the new realities that have come in Christ,<sup>4</sup> the seed of faith that was there now needs to become the solid oak of our lives. In just the book of Romans alone, Paul says that Abraham was counted righteous because of faith and then mentions Genesis, "Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3). Citing Isaiah, he says, "And whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame" (Isa 28:16; Rom 9:33). And quoting Habakkuk he says, "The righteous shall live by faith" (Hab 2:4; Rom 1:17).

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<sup>4</sup> What I mean is that in the OT, faith was in the Son, but not as a human being. He was an Angel, the Word of God. Most did not see him. But now, in the new covenant, he has come as a man, was seen by many, did his ministry publicly, and did the work as a man that we need for our salvation. This makes faith in Christ Jesus all the more important and obvious in the NT, and the NT writer pick up on this.



Hebrews is doing the very same thing. In fact, it has also just quoted the very same Habakkuk verse (**Heb 10:38**). This, along with a quotation from a passage in Isaiah 26:20 (**Heb 10:37**) becomes the immediate context of our definition. Hebrews is rooting its definition, indeed the very existence and necessity of faith, in the Old Testament just as it should. Christianity is not a new religion.

I want us to look at this Isaiah quote for a moment, because it actually sets up the definition of Habakkuk. It is combined with Habakkuk and says, “**Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay...**” (**Heb 10:37; Isa 26:20 LXX**). How might this relate to faith? **First**, it is combined with Habakkuk, “**... but my righteous one shall live by faith.**” If it is combined with this statement of the prophet on faith, then it must be related to faith. **Second**, Isaiah’s statement is a statement of the future. It is eschatological. In Hebrews, faith is the assurance of things hoped for. This is also the future. For Hebrews, the future is now because Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. Eschatology begins with his first, not his second coming. And yet, there are things about the future that are not yet here. Therefore,

faith has something to do both with our own past, but also our future. This takes us into the definition of faith.

## *The Object of Faith*

The definition has two parts. First, it is an “assurance of things hoped for.” Second, it is “the conviction of things not seen.” In many respects, like many verses in the Psalms, these are parallel ideas. In the first part, there are two key words. The first is “assurance” (*hypostasis*). You have heard about this word if you study theology. We talk about the hypostatic union of Christ as two natures in one person (*hypostasis*). Strangely, this is not helpful for understanding that biblical meaning, because the philosophers actually changed the biblical definition of hypostasis from nature to person. Nevertheless, I wanted you to see where you have heard this word before.

This very important word has been used twice already in Hebrews. Looking at its use will help us understand the meaning here. The first takes us back to the very beginning of the book where it deals with the Lord Jesus Christ. “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his

nature (*hupostasis*)” (Heb 1:3). The word is variously translated as “nature” (ESV), “subsistence” (YLT), “essence” (CJB), or “substance” (DRA).<sup>5</sup> “Substance” is the same word found in Hebrews 11:1 in some translations, although the ESV says “assurance.” Why would the ESV be so different here from what it is in this earlier verse?

The other use of the word *hupostasis* is in Heb 3:14, “For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.” The word is now translated as “confidence.” This is much closer to “assurance.” What is that “original confidence?” Surely, it is Christ himself. But obviously the word has changed meaning a bit so that it is now confidence in Christ, the substance of God. This gives our own verse a kind of double meaning. We have assurance that Christ is the substance of God. Thus, faith in Hebrews 11:1 involves Christ himself as the object of our faith to actually having assurance in him.

**The object of faith** is what you believe *in* or someone you believe. If the object of faith is yourself, then you are trusting in a wicked doomed thing. There is perhaps no

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<sup>5</sup> Older translations like the KJV and Geneva went with “person,” seemingly taking “His glory” as referring to the Father rather than to the Godhead.

greater foolishness in all the world than to put faith in yourself. Man is a vapor who rises at dawn and is gone before the sun barely comes over the horizon. Man is finite, limited in power, short on knowledge, large on depravity. To make him (or her, any human) the object of your faith is to trust in softness, sin, and stupidity to deliver you. To trust in faith itself is maybe worse, since faith in faith is like the Emperor's New Clothes. There's nothing there. But Christ, who is the substance of God in the flesh, if he is the object of your faith, nothing could be more sure.

### *The Evidence of Faith*

*Christ* as the substance of faith is critical to understand. I can't overemphasize this point. The object of faith is not merely "God" (though Jesus is fully God). It is Jesus Christ. *Christ Alone* was as much the cry of the Reformers as *Faith Alone*. Why? Because God is invisible. Look briefly at the end of the definition in Hebrews where it says that Faith "**is the conviction of things not seen.**" We will look at this in more detail later, but simply take note here of the "**not seen.**" Things that are not seen are invisible. God is invisible.

Now as we have seen, some people equate faith in an invisible God with something irrational. God is invisible, but not irrational. But some people think faith in him is. Take [evidences for the existence of God](#). There are plenty of them out there, and it is good to learn about them in apologetic situations.<sup>6</sup> These try to demonstrate the rationality of believing in God.

There are all kinds of arguments for God's existence. **The Ontological Argument** deals with the Being/Essence/Substance of God and argues from the necessity of God's being that belief in him is self-evident. **The Cosmological Argument** deals with creation and argues that it is obvious that if there is a creation that there must be a Creator. **The Design Argument** deals with the fine-tuning of the universe, and that because it all displays such order, logic, purpose, and meaning that it isn't an accident, it must have been designed by someone. Many other arguments exist as well. The purpose of these is to remove doubts that people have about God's existence.

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<sup>6</sup> Apologetics (from the Greek word *apologia* meaning "defense") is the "defense of the Christian Faith."

But there can be a problem here. Sometimes people use them to argue people into the kingdom. This is to misuse the argument and to subtly shift true faith into pure reason. The opposite of blind faith is not sight! Faith is not identical with reason. To do this can actually destroy faith, as is easily seen by the plentiful arguments made by atheists of why God *doesn't* exist. Cunning, serpentine minds can make reason say just about anything they want. So if we use proofs this way, if we think we can argue people into the kingdom, we fail to take seriously human depravity. Long ago, **Chrysostom** said, “**Now such as are in this mind you cannot convince by human wisdom. Nay, if you want so to convince them, you do but the contrary. For the things which transcend reasoning require faith alone ... Therefore they who inquire by reasonings, it is they who perish**” (Sermon on 1Co 1:18-20).<sup>7</sup>

When thinking about the wonderful proofs of God's existence, it is important to remember the biblical truth that **all men already know God**. At their best, proofs are simply

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<sup>7</sup> John Chrysostom, “Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the First Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians,” in *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Hubert Kestell Cornish, John Medley, and Talbot B. Chambers, vol. 12, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 16.

helping people look in the mirror to see what they already know. Our problem is not knowledge, nor does Hebrews 11:1 tell us that it is. What you have to understand is that when we are talking about biblical faith, the goal is not to move someone to mere brute knowledge of “God.” There are many gods! Edgar and Oliphint wisely say, “The existence of God and other like truths about God, which can be known by natural reason, are not articles of faith, but are preambles to the articles; for faith presupposes natural knowledge.”<sup>8</sup> All men already know that he is powerful and that he exists, but they suppress this truth in their sin.

Yet, faith is not opposed to reason. This is where *Christ* the Person rather than God the idea becomes so vital. Christ puts flesh on God (or better, God put on human flesh). Christ allowed real men in a real past to really see God. The Apostles regularly talked about this and they said it was important. “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life” (1Jn 1:1) ... “Blessed are the eyes that see

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<sup>8</sup> William Edgar and K. Scott Oliphint, eds., *Christian Apologetics Past and Present: A Primary Source Reader, to 1500*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 403–404.

what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it” (Luke 10:23-24). God becoming man, the virgin birth, the miracles of Jesus, the real death, burial, and resurrection in front of many witnesses—the Bible places great emphasis on these things. This is what we call The Faith (capital letters). It is our creed, our confession and we hold fast to it. Christ is the evidence for the existence of God.

But true faith is more than this, especially since Jesus is no longer with us in the flesh. “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29). Chrysostom said in the same paragraph (above), “Should we set about convincing men by reasoning, how God became man, and entered into the Virgin’s womb, and not commit the matter unto faith, they will but deride the more.” Obviously, men mock these things just like they do proofs for the invisible God. They’ve done it forever, even when the Lord sent Moses and Aaron and the staff became a serpent and then a rod again and it said, “That they may believe you, that the God of your fathers has appeared to you” (Ex 4:5 LXX). Israel believed.



Egypt did not. Thus, while important, we have to get it out of our mind that faith is not just about pure reason or proofs. It is more. As Isaiah says, “If you believe not, neither will you at all understand” (Isa 7:9 LXX). We do not understand in order to believe. We believe in order to understand.

### *The Direction of Faith*

I said that our definition begins with two important words, not just one. The first was this idea of **substance**, and we have focused on that now for a while. But the second is just as important. Faith is the assurance of **things hoped for**. **Hope**. Future. Eschatology. Faith is not merely a focus on past things, but on future things. **John Piper** says, “By faith I do not merely mean the confidence that Jesus died for your sins, but also the confidence that God will ‘also with him freely give us all things’ (Romans 8:32). Faith is primarily a future-oriented ‘assurance of things hoped for’ (Hebrews 11:1). Its essence is the deep satisfaction with all that God promises to be for us in Jesus—beginning now!”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> John Piper, *Future Grace* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1995), 13.

It is partly because faith is seen as a hope in things to come that the translation “assurance” rather than “substance” is sometimes used. Like “confidence,” it is a perfectly legitimate translation of this word. We need assurance of the future. This week I attended a conference of Reformed Baptist pastors. In the last meeting, the speaker began to talk about **suicide**. The conference’s theme was on suffering, so the idea of suicide fit. He said that there is one thing that all suicidal people have in common. **They have lost all hope**. This is a very scary thing, given that hope is so closely related to faith. But when we have faith, hope is not gone. It thrives, because that is what faith is. Faith is the antidote to depressed, suicidal thoughts!

What are we hoping for? We could give many answers, but let’s return to the **context**, which is a similar theme to the conference I attended. The context is suffering. The Hebrew Christians were going through suffering at the hands of Jews. These very words are the prelude to our definition of faith: **“Recall the former days when ... you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had**

compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property” (Heb 10:32-34). This may very well refer us to the early chapters in Acts.

When you preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, you get persecution. The same Reformation that recovered “faith alone,”<sup>10</sup> brought with it not only great Reforms—both practically and theologically, but also great **persecution**. Christians were suddenly and increasingly finding their property seized, themselves thrown in prison, and worse. These brought with them great temptations to compromise and return to a form of Christianity that was like living in shadows rather than in the light of Christ Alone. But few gave in to the temptation. Why?

What was the antidote? Hebrews tells them, “**Do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.**” He is telling them not to give up their faith. What is that reward? It is the “**hope**” of Heb 11:1. And what is it specifically? “**a better possession and an abiding one**” (10:34). This is “**what is promised**” (36). When you look to

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<sup>10</sup> Going deeper: I say “recovered,” though this begs the question at the heart of the Reformation, the answer that Rome did not agree with. I did a study on the words “faith alone” in the Church Fathers. Like the relatively rare use of faith in the OT compared to the new, I found that the Fathers did not use the phrase like the Reformers did, but I also found that it was not absent either. We saw (above) that Chrysostom used the phrase.

Christ by faith, you are believing that he will give you a better possession of heaven. So much of the time we think only about the past. But this is the future. This is our hope. As Luther said, this is “the possession and supply of things that are not of this world, but things that are to come.”<sup>11</sup>

This will actually become a specific focus of the chapter on faith after the definition. It will tell us about [Abraham](#) who looked forward to an enduring city that is built by God. Therefore, we will return to that next time. Until then, the focus of our time now is to believe that this is what is coming. Jesus—the object of our faith—said, “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me” ([John 14:1](#)). Here, he is talking about faith! He goes on to tell them why they should believe. “In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” ([2-3](#)). This is the famous “mansion in heaven” passage, and it is exactly what Hebrews has in mind.

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 10: First Lectures on the Psalms I: Psalms 1-75*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, electronic ed., vol. 10 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 356.

But why should we believe him? Because he has proven to us through real evidence and a reasonable faith that what he has promised can be trusted. This is the **intersection where Christ's past works and future promises collide**. What has been done in the past becomes the basis for the certainty of future promises. In the OT, those “past works” were his deliverances of his people from slavery and death. Thus, Isaiah says that he believed in Christ! Did you hear it earlier? “Therefore thus says the Lord, *even* the Lord, Behold, I lay for the foundations of Zion a costly stone, a choice, a cornerstone, a precious *stone*, for its foundations; and he that believes *on him* shall by no means be ashamed” (Isa 28:16 LXA).

In the NT, we believe Jesus because he did everything we need for our salvation, and faith is about having salvation—eternal life. This includes not only physical redemption in some places, but because he became a man—as Hebrews has taught us, and has already done all these salvific things for us—as Hebrews has taught us, then why would we doubt his future promises? He himself is the first-fruit of our own resurrection from the dead. He is preparing

a place for you. Do you believe him? Do you have that assurance? This is the essence of faith.

### *The Certainty of Faith*

Now, our definition has a second part to it. Faith is “**the conviction of things not seen.**” Again, there are two important parts. The first is “**conviction.**” This is the only time this word (*elegchos*) is used in the entire Bible, though it is from a group of related words that are found elsewhere. Our definition in Hebrews appears to give a kind of parallelism. Thus, some have argued that the word should be closely translated the way “assurance” is translated. Hence, it is sometimes rendered as “conviction.” To have a strong conviction is certainly to have a strong assurance that you are right.

Conviction is more than assurance. Many translations go with something like “**proof**” (SCR) or “**evidence**” (KJV). We have already seen how evidence is presupposed by faith. Christianity is not irrational, but is built upon real, objective evidence. So this word takes us right back to this idea. This

refers to the certainty of faith. Faith is sure, strong, certain. It is not wishing upon a star or a leap in the dark.

Thinking about the parallelism, if the focus in the first half of the verse is on our hope, and our hope is in the future, then something about this evidence must surely be in the future. The second important idea then in this second part of the definition is that it is on “**things not seen.**” Certainly, our hope in the future is not yet seen, and it has to be at least part of what our faith is.

But we also need to remember that **God is not seen.** “Can you see God?” “No, but he always sees me,” says the catechism. Again, that takes us back to the proofs. But again, we remember that Jesus was seen, though he is no longer seen because he has gone into heaven. Therefore, the focus of what is not seen is again on the object of faith. God is the object of faith, but God as revealed in Christ Jesus is the special object of faith.

With this, the definition comes to a close, and it therefore confronts you with some questions. What is the object of your faith? What direction are you looking for your faith? How sturdy is your faith? Do you have faith? As

you think about these questions, let's be careful to distinguish correctly.

First, there is **right faith and wrong faith**. Everyone has faith in something. It is inescapable, since no one knows all things exhaustively and perfectly except God. Some faith is correct. Other faith is incorrect. Correct faith can be defined as justified or warranted true belief. It is justified because it has reasons to back it up. It is rooted in knowledge and that knowledge contains information that is rational and empirical. It is true because it corresponds to reality. It is belief because the person has assented to the truths of those things and accepts them.

Wrong faith cannot save you, because its object, its direction, and its hope is in the wrong thing. If you have faith in your faith, it actually makes you the object of faith. This is one idea of having "faith in faith" that I talked about earlier. Word of Faith teachers are the ultimate heretics and liars. They are deceived.

Faith is not a substance, not a *hypostasis*. No. It is merely a spiritual instrument that receives. **Christ is the hypostasis** of God and of our faith. Our faith is a confidence that he is the substance of the invisible God and that his promises of



the future of certain to come to pass. Do you have this faith? Are you looking inward at your own heart, downward at your own navel, or outward to your fellow man for your faith? Or are you looking upward and forward to the living God to deliver you from the wrath to come? In the midst of great difficulties, where are you looking? When you get angry at your fellow brother, where are you looking? When someone hurts you deeply, where are you looking? When pain takes over your body, where are you looking? When evil seems to abound all around, where are you looking? When you don't know who to vote for, where are you looking? When you are totally satisfied in all the things this world has to offer, where are you looking? When to lay your head on your pillow at night, where are you looking? When you wake up in the morning to start a new day, where are you looking?

Perhaps you aren't sure how to answer that. You know you have a right faith, but you often feel your faith giving way to other things. This is now the difference between a weak faith and a strong faith. Make no mistake about this: **weak faith is true faith, not false faith.** True faith is not

merely head knowledge, but it delights in God's work on your behalf. Weak faith, however weak it is, still does that.

But weak faith is not strong. It is easily entangled by the world, the flesh, and the devil. It listens to evil voices. It gives way to temporary vices. This is why we are called to mature. The goal of our Christian lives is to eat and drink the Word of God so that our weak faith might be made strong, so that the worries of this life do not finally choke out our faith altogether. This is the present focus of Hebrews itself.

How do you overcome this? By understanding **where faith comes from**, what it does, and how it grows. First, where does it come from? Ephesians is very clear here. **Faith is a gift of God (Eph 2:8)**. Romans talks about this as **"the measure of faith that God has assigned" (Rom 12:3)**. When you think about a measure, you think about various amounts of ingredients. This is the idea in mind. God gives to some great amounts of faith and to others not as much. Maybe it seems unfair. But all Christians have real faith.

And do not think that the measure of faith you have been given must remain constant. No. **Faith grows**. It matures. Luther said, **"There are some who are still weak in**

faith, who ought to be instructed, and who would gladly believe as we do. But their ignorance prevents them ... we must bear patiently with these people.” He talks about two ways faith grows. One is **through proper instruction about it**. This is why the right teachers, the right churches, and the right doctrines are so important.

The other is through proper behavior from God’s people towards one another. Did you know that you have the ability to suppress someone else’s faith in God’s providence? This is what Luther’s quote is actually about, and he has in mind the “weaker brother” of something like Romans 14 where we are not to put stumbling blocks in each others way, hindrances to growing in grace. We do this primarily by how we love one another. If you will not love each other, then you hinder someone’s growth in faith. Perhaps worse. Woe to you.

### *To Be Commended Is To Be Justified*

But let’s return to the instruction. We can love one another all day long, but if they never come to a proper knowledge, then it is impossible for them to grow, because

knowledge is how God imparts faith to our souls. Here I want to look briefly at **Hebrews 11:2**. Returning to the discussion of the Reformation and faith, we saw that their big emphasis was on being justified by faith alone. What is justification?

**Justification is a legal term**, a court term. A person stands before a court on trial for a crime. When the sentence is read, they are either pronounced guilty or not guilty. A sentence of “guilty” is a dead sentence and will be punished by eternity in hell. A sentence of “not guilty” is a pardon and the person is justified by the court. They will not serve the sentence of death.

Guilt is viewed from the perspective of law. If you break the law, you are guilty before the court of heaven. The problem is, we are all guilty and so the question becomes, how can anyone be justified? The answer others give is that you have your good deeds outweigh your bad deeds, as if the courts worked on a cosmic scale or something. But if **Charles Manson** did really nice things, would it ever pardon him for the mass murders he committed in forty years ago? Of course not. Would it ever take away the fact that those people are dead because of what he did? No. In the eyes of

God's law, because God is perfectly holy, the only way a person can be justified is by being perfect. Anything short of this is a falling short of God's glory and deserves punishment.

This is where the Reformation again spoke so clearly that you are justified by faith alone in Christ alone by grace alone. It is all God's work, not yours. There is no possible way you can justify your behavior before God and think he will let you off. But Christ has appeased the wrath of God, as Hebrews 10 has said. And God through Christ gives grace to any who trust in him by faith alone.

You may not think that Hebrews ever talks about justification, but you would be wrong. The verse says, “**For by it [faith] people of old received their commendation.**” The word “commendation” is fascinating. While not being an absolute synonym for justification, it is absolutely a legal term. It appears a smattering of times in the LXX, and in every case it refers to legal witnesses who could be summoned in a court of law (**Gen 31:46; Num 35:30; Dt 19:15**; etc.).

The word is translated in Hebrews 11:2 as “**commendation**” (ESV), “**gained approval**” (NAS),

“testified” (YLT), “attested the merit” (CJB), “had witnesses borne to them” (ASV), “obtained a good report” (KJV). It will appear several time in Hebrews 11, each time with reference to God approving of the actions of a person. Not because of their actions *per se*, but because of their faith. By faith so and so did some action and was commended by God.

Effectively, this means the same thing as justification. So yes, Hebrews talks about justification. If God approves of you as a witness in a court, then he justifies you and pronounces you not guilty. Why? Not on your own merit, but on faith in the merits and promises of Christ. Christ obeyed God for you and **you believe it**. Christ promises to justify you though you are a sinner and **you believe it**. Christ promises future freedom and life and **you believe it**. Christ promises you present freedom and life and **you believe it**. This is why it says it is impossible to please God without faith. Only faith receives the promises of the gospel. Only faith receives allows God to commend you. Only faith in Jesus Christ.

So our anatomy of faith. Let’s look at it again. We **defined faith**—a certain sure hope in things not seen. It has **distinguished between** right and wrong faith, weak and

strong faith. It has told us about the **opposites of faith**—works and sight and reason alone. It has given us **the object of faith**—our Lord Jesus Christ. It has pointed us to **the direction of faith**—the future promises. It has given us **the goal of faith**—eternal life in Christ. It has given us **the foundation and confidence of faith**—Christ has done all things on our behalf. It has shown us **what faith does**—justifies the ungodly, acquitting them of wrongdoing before the throne of heaven. It has told you **how you receive faith**—as the gift of God. It has explained **how we grow in faith**—through knowledge by the word (and sacraments) and love for one another. Only the living God and a living faith can do this. We are not dissecting something dead. We are looking at that which is alive and able to change the world through the Spirit of God as he is pleased to work in the hearts of people.

Faith comes through hearing, and hearing through the word of God (**Rom 10:17**). As it said earlier in Hebrews, “Good news came to us just as to them [OT Israel], but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened” (**Heb 4:2**). Therefore, have you heard the voice of Christ today? Have

you listened to him speaking to you about faith? Have you trusted and believed and begun to obey the Lord by faith alone? Hear the Word of the Lord, the Substance and Person of our faith. Cling to and follow that which you cannot see, but who once was seen, who died, was raised, and who ascended to heaven to prepare a place for you. Believe him and believe in him today. If you do not, it is not possible to please God, no matter what you do. All of your best works will be as filthy rags. But through faith, you will receive the righteousness of Christ and you will be accepted in his sight. What an easy burden for he has borne it all. Therefore, believe in him today.

Hebrews 11:1

Greek	estin de pistis elpizomenōn hupostasis pragmatōn elenxos ou blepomenōn
YLT	And faith is of things hoped for a confidence, of matters not seen a conviction,
NAS ESV	Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.
Scr	And belief is the substance of what is expected, the proof of what is not seen.
DRA/VUL	Now faith is the substance of things to be hoped for, the evidence of things that appear not.
KJV	Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.
NIVO	Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.
TNT	Fayth is a sure confidence of thynges which are hoped for and a certayntie of thynges which are not sene.
GNV	Now faith is the grounds of things, which are hoped for, and the evidence of things which are not seene.
MIT	Faith assures one of the substance of hope, providing verification of invisible realities.



## Appendix: The Church Fathers on “Faith Alone”

This brief Appendix is meant to give an overview of the phrase as it was used in the early church. It begins with a quote from one of the editors of the Schaff edition of the Fathers. Then a number of quotes from the Fathers themselves appear. This is followed by a side by side comparison of three Fathers who seem to contradict themselves. This section helps explain why Rome could take the position they did and why the Reformation could take the position that they did. At the end of the day, it is best to understand that the Fathers were not contradicting themselves any more than Romans and Galatians contradicted James on this very point. Instead, it seems to me that there has been some talking past one another, and much stubbornness—especially on the part of Rome—to not hear what the Reformation was actually saying about faith. As the old adage goes, we are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone. This simply means that faith is always accompanied by good works. God saves people to do them. Indeed, this is why he chose us in Christ (Eph 2:10). Nevertheless, we are not saved or justified by these works, but by faith in Christ through grace—which is the gift of God (2:7-8). It is not the result of works, so that no man may boast (9).

### Quotes that positively express “faith alone”

A Quote from an historian doing a biography on Vincent of Lerins, *The Commonitory: Introduction*. “profane novelties must be rejected, and that faith alone adhered to which the universal Church has held consentiently from the earliest times”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., “The Commonitory of Vincent of Lérins: Introduction,” in *Sulpitius Severus, Vincent of Lérins, John Cassian*, vol. 11, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1894), 130.

*Augustine (On the Trinity 4.15.20).*

“For these persons promise themselves cleansing by their own righteousness for this reason, because some of them have been able to penetrate with the eye of the mind beyond the whole creature, and to touch, though it be in ever so small a part, the light of the unchangeable truth; a thing which they deride many Christians for being not yet able to do, who, in the meantime, live by faith alone.”

*Ambrose (Letter 63.97).*

“Do not trust in riches; for all such things are left here, faith alone will accompany you. And righteousness indeed will go with you if faith has led the way.”

*Aristides (Apology).*

“Now by the grace of God it was given me to speak wisely concerning Him. So far as I have received the faculty I will speak, yet not according to the measure of the inscrutability of His greatness shall I be able to do so, but by faith alone do I glorify and adore Him.”

*John of Damascus (On the Orthodox Faith 4.13).*

For just as God made all that He made by the energy of the Holy Spirit, so also now the energy of the Spirit performs those things that are supernatural and which it is not possible to comprehend unless by faith alone.

*Gregory of Nyssa (Against Eunomius 1.26).*

“But the existence which is all-sufficient, everlasting, world-enveloping, is not in space, nor in time: it is before these, and above these in an ineffable way; self-contained, knowable by faith alone; immeasurable by ages; without the accompaniment of time; seated and resting in itself, with no associations of past or future, there being nothing beside and beyond itself, whose passing can make something past and something future.”

*Clement of Alexandria (Misc 5.6).*

Priests are “those bathed in water, and clothed in faith alone, and expecting their own individual abode).”

*Theodoret (Letter 83).*

“Through faith alone I look for finding some mercy in the day of the Lord’s appearing. I wish and I pray that I may follow the footprints of the holy Fathers, and I earnestly desire to keep undefiled the evangelic teaching which was in sum delivered to us by the holy Fathers assembled in council at the Bithynian Nicæa [goes on to talk about the Creed and the Theotokos].”

*Chrysostom (Sermon on Romans 1:13).*

For his preaching is set forth to all alike, it knows no distinction of rank, no preëminence of nation, no other thing of the sort; for faith alone does it require, and not reasonings.<sup>13</sup>

## **Quotes That Seem to Show Contradiction but Don’t:**

*Chrysostom*

“From faith alone, he says, they obtained the same gifts. This is also meant as a lesson to those (objectors); this is able to teach even them that faith only is needed, not works nor circumcision” (*Sermon on Acts 15:1*).

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<sup>13</sup> John Chrysostom, “Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans,” in *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistle to the Romans*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J. B. Morris, W. H. Simcox, and George B. Stevens, vol. 11, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 347–348.

And if any is sick, instead of tears and lamentations they have recourse to prayers. Often not the care of physicians, but faith alone relieves the sick” (*Sermon on 1 Tim 5:9-10*).

### Yet

“But wherefore hath He chosen us? ‘That we should be holy and without a blemish before Him.’ That you may not then, when you hear that ‘He hath chosen us,’ imagine that faith alone is sufficient, he proceeds to add life and conduct. To this end, saith he, hath He chosen us, and on this condition, ‘that we should be holy and without blemish’” (*Sermon on Eph 1:4*).

“‘Is it then enough,’ saith one, ‘to believe on the Son, that one may have eternal life?’ By no means. And hear Christ Himself declaring this, and saying, ‘Not every one that saith unto Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven’ (Matt 7:21); and the blasphemy against the Spirit is enough of itself to cast a man into hell. But why speak I of a portion of doctrine? Though a man believe rightly on the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, yet if he lead not a right life, his faith will avail nothing towards his salvation. Therefore when He saith, ‘This is life eternal, that they may know Thee the only true God’ (c. 17:3), let us not suppose that the (knowledge) spoken of is sufficient for our salvation; we need besides this a most exact life and conversation. Since though he has said here, ‘He that believeth on the Son hath eternal life,’ and in the same place something even stronger, (for he weaves his discourse not of blessings only, but of their contraries also, speaking thus: ‘He that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him’;) yet not even from this do we assert that faith alone is sufficient to salvation” (*Sermon on John 3:35-36*).

*Augustine*

(see above):

## Yet

“Surely it was a wholesome alarm that believers might not think that they could be saved on account of their faith alone, even although they should live in these evils: the Apostle James with most clear speech crying out against that notion, and saying, “If any say that he have faith, and have not works, shall his faith be able to save him?” (*On Continnence* 14.30).

## In One Together:

“I have written a book on this subject, entitled *Of Faith and Works*, in which, to the best of my ability, God assisting me, I have shown from Scripture, that the faith which saves us is that which the Apostle Paul clearly enough describes when he says: ‘For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love.’ But if it worketh evil, and not good, then without doubt, as the Apostle James says, ‘it is dead, being alone.’ The same apostle says again, ‘What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? Can faith save him?’ And further, if a wicked man shall be saved by fire on account of his faith alone, and if this is what the blessed Apostle Paul means when he says, ‘But he himself shall be saved, yet so as by fire;’ then faith without works *can* save a man, and what his fellow-apostle James says must be false. And that must be false which Paul himself says in another place: ‘Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.’ For if those who persevere in these wicked courses shall nevertheless be saved on account of their faith in Christ, how can it be true that they shall not inherit the kingdom of God?” (*The Enchiridion* 67.18).

*Ambrose*

“For not even faith alone is sufficient for perfection, unless the redeemed also obtain the grace of Baptism, and receive the Blood of Christ” (*Letter 7.20*).

Yet:

“Do not trust in riches; for all such things are left here, faith alone will accompany you. And righteousness indeed will go with you if faith has led the way” (*Letter 63.97*).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ambrose of Milan, “The Letters of St. Ambrose,” in *St. Ambrose: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. H. de Romestin, E. de Romestin, and H. T. F. Duckworth, vol. 10, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1896), 469.