

What Is Faith?

Crucial Questions

R. C. SPROUL

What Is Faith?

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Chapter One

A Hopeful Vision

When we talk about Christianity, we are more likely to call it the “Christian faith” than the “Christian religion.” This is appropriate in that the concept of faith is fundamental to Christianity because faith is central to the biblical view of redemption. Yet faith is a many-faceted concept, so even many professing Christians struggle to understand exactly what it is.

In this booklet, I want to explore the nature of faith as it is defined in the Bible. We will focus on how faith relates

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to our salvation and will discuss the necessary ingredients of what we call “saving faith.” We’ll also look at how faith relates to reason and at other issues that we encounter in the Bible with respect to this concept.

Faith Is the Substance of Hope

The most foundational definition for faith in the Bible is found in Hebrews: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good testimony” (11:1–2, NKJV). Note the distinction the author of Hebrews makes between faith and hope. These ideas are intimately connected, but they are distinct nonetheless. In a similar way, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13 of the great triad of Christian virtues: faith, hope, and love. This passage also reveals that there is a distinction between faith and hope.

Before we explore the link between these concepts, let me address the biblical idea of hope, because the word *hope* functions somewhat differently in the New Testament than it does in Western countries today. When we use the word *hope*, we usually are referring to an emotional state of desire in our hearts regarding what we would like to happen in

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the future but are not sure will come to pass. We may hope that our favorite teams will win football or basketball games, but that hope may never materialize. For instance, I am a perennial fan of the Pittsburgh Steelers, and I regularly hope that the Steelers will win their football games. This may be a vain and futile hope because it's anything but a certainty. There is a kind of hope that does not make us ashamed (cf. Rom. 5:5), but I'm constantly afraid that my hopes for the Steelers may make me ashamed, for while they regularly win championships, they lose games, too.

However, when the Bible speaks of hope, it is not referring to a desire for a future outcome that is uncertain, but rather a desire for a future outcome that is absolutely sure. Based on our trust in the promises of God, we can be fully confident about the outcome. When God gives His people a promise for the future, and the church grasps it, this hope is said to be the “anchor of the soul” (Heb. 6:19). An anchor is that which gives a ship protection against aimless drifting in the sea. The promises of God for tomorrow are the anchor for believers today.

When the Bible says “faith is the *substance* of things hoped for” (Heb. 11:1, emphasis added), it is speaking of something that has weight or significance—something of

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extreme value. The implication is that faith communicates the essence of the hope.

In a real sense, hope is faith looking forward. The word *faith* carries a strong element of trust. If my hope is based on something God has said will happen in the future, the hope I have for that future promise finds its substance from my trust and confidence in the One making the promise. I can have hope because I have faith in God. Because I can trust the promise of God for tomorrow, there is substance to my hope; my hope is not just a chimera, a fantasy, or a wish projection based on idle dreams. Rather, it is based on something substantive.

Faith Is the Evidence of Things Not Seen

The definition of faith continues: “faith is . . . the evidence of things not seen.” The author uses a reference to one of the senses of the human body through which we gain knowledge, the sense of sight. There is a popular expression today, “Seeing is believing.” Similarly, people from Missouri like to say, “Show me.” This attitude is not opposed to biblical faith, for the New Testament calls us to put our trust in the gospel not on the basis of some irrational leap

into the darkness but on the basis of the testimony of eyewitnesses who report in Scripture about what they saw.

Think, for example, of the apostolic testimony of Peter: “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Peter 1:16). Likewise, when Luke begins his Gospel, he addresses it to Theophilus, saying, “it seemed good to me . . . , having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you” (v. 3). He is talking about things he has substantiated on the basis of eyewitness testimony. In the same way, when Paul defends his confidence in the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, he appeals to the eyewitnesses of the risen Christ: Cephas, the Twelve, the five hundred, James, and all the apostles (vv. 5–7). Then he writes, “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me” (v. 8). Paul is saying, “I believe in the resurrection because many eyewitnesses saw the resurrected Christ, and I saw Him myself.”

So there is a link in the New Testament between faith and seeing, and yet the author of Hebrews describes faith as the conviction of things *not* seen. Maybe this is why some people argue that there is a biblical ground for regarding

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blind faith as virtuous. After all, if one cannot see, one is said to be blind, so if faith is evidence for that which cannot be seen, that must mean that the faith of which the author is speaking is blind faith.

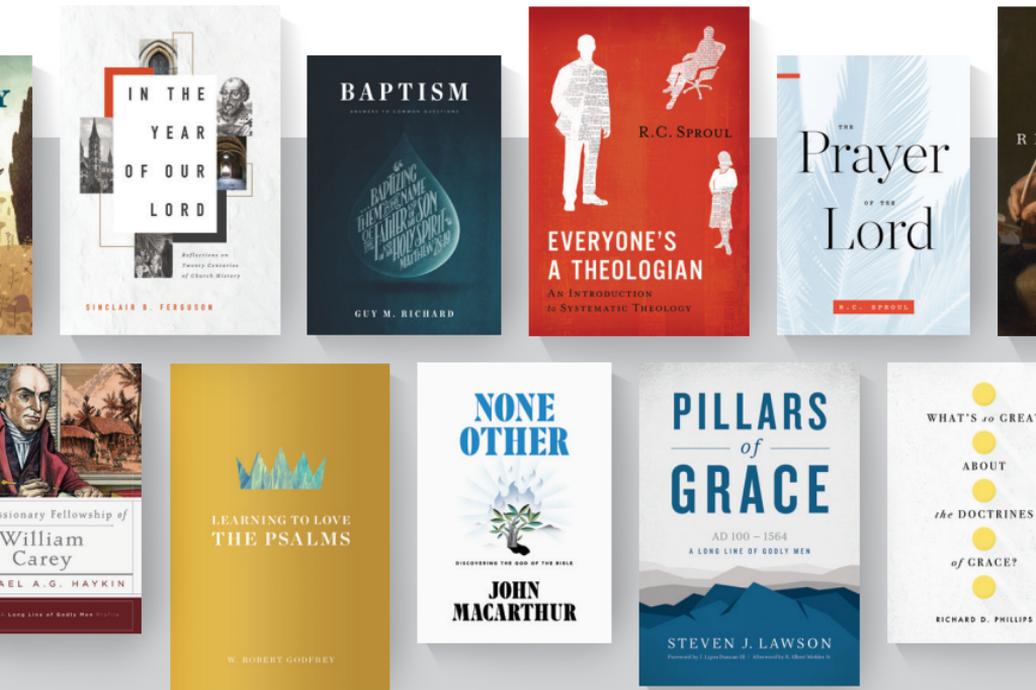
I cannot think of anything that is farther from the meaning of Hebrews 11:1–2 than blind faith. Those promoting blind faith say: “We believe what we believe for no reason whatsoever. It’s totally gratuitous.” The idea is that there’s some kind of virtue in closing our eyes, taking a deep breath, and wishing with all of our might that something is true—then saying, “It’s true.” That is credulity, not faith.

The Bible never claims that we should jump into the darkness. In fact, the biblical injunction is for people to come out of the darkness and into the light (cf. John 3:19). Faith is not blind in the sense of being arbitrary, whimsical, or a mere expression of human desire. If that were the case, why would the author of Hebrews say that faith is “the evidence of things not seen”?

When faith is linked to hope, it is put into the time frame of the future, and the one thing that I cannot see at all is tomorrow. None of us has yet experienced tomorrow. As I said earlier, I have hope that the Pittsburgh Steelers will

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A blind leap? Hope? Or something else?

We often hear people say, “Just have a little faith.” But what is faith? Is it a blind leap into the dark? Believing something without evidence? How does the Bible define faith?

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul looks to Hebrews 11 for a biblical definition of faith: believing God and living by His Word. Exploring the lives of God’s people in history, he shows how they trusted God when they didn’t know the future. Like them, when we face the struggles of life, we too must trust God.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

Dr. R.C. Sproul was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew’s Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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