Faith & Salvation

John Morris

Four times, the Bible declares, *"The just shall live by faith."* Paul famously wrote to the Ephesians, *"For by grace you have been saved through faith"* (**Ephesians 2:8**). To the Romans, he stated, "we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand" (**Romans 5:2**). Faith, then, is the door into the halls of redemption. Where there is faith, there is salvation.

Right?

Right. Provided it is the right kind of faith. According to the Bible, not all faith is saving faith.

Not All Faith is Saving Faith?

Not according to Jesus. Jesus said to Jews who had faith ("believed") in Him, *"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples"* (**John 8:31**). To be a true disciple is, of course, to be saved (**John 15:2, 8**). But faith, by itself, was not sufficient to make these individuals true disciples. Jesus said they would have to add to their faith obedience.

The apostle whom Jesus loved would later echo this same sentiment: *"Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments"* (**1 John 2:3**). And again: *"But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in Him. By this we know that we are in Him"* (**1 John 2:5**). *"By this,"* says John. Both times. By what? Obedience. We know that we *"know Him"* and are *"in Him"* if we obey Him.

In John's account of the gospel, he tells us that many among the Jewish leaders *"believed in"* Jesus (**John 12:42**). However, *"they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God"* (**John 12:43**), and because of this, did not confess their faith in Jesus. What did this mean for them? Jesus answers: *"Whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven"* (**Matthew 10:32**). These men refused to make a *"confession unto salvation"* (**Romans 10:10**); consequently, they stood outside the saving grace of Jesus—even though they "believed in Him."

Finally, Jesus' brother James provides still more evidence of this truth. He asks: *"What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can faith save him?"* (**James 2:14**). He answers: *"Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead…You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone"* (**James 2:17, 24**).

It is possible to have faith—to believe—but for that faith not to save. Not all faith is saving faith.

Saving Faith Includes Obedience

"He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (**John 3:36**, NASB; see also ESV). Notice how Jesus does not contrast belief with unbelief but contrasts belief with disobedience. Why would He do that? Because where there is disobedience, there is unbelief (see also **Hebrews 3:18-19**). The two go hand in hand. You don't have one without the other. And that being true, the converse must also be true: Where there is faith (i.e., saving faith), there is obedience.

Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (**James 2:21-23**, NIV).

James says Abraham's belief was completed by his obedience.

Necessarily, then, faith is incomplete until there is obedience. Is incomplete faith sufficient to save? James says no (**James 2:14, 17, 20, 26**).

So, faith is God's prerequisite for salvation, yes. But the faith that brings about salvation is a completed faith—a faith which has been fulfilled/perfected by obedience. Faith that is not accompanied by obedience still gets to wear the name *"faith"* or *"belief"* (**John 12:42**), but it is dead ("inoperative and ineffective") and will not save.

Faith, Salvation, & Baptism

This reality helps bring together statements about salvation in Scripture—particularly those about belief and baptism—which appear, at first, to be at odds with each other:

- Belief saves (**Acts 16:31**), and yet baptism does, too (**1 Peter 3:21**).

- Belief brings about remission of sins (**Acts 10:43**), and yet baptism does, too (**Acts 2:38**; **22:16**).

- Belief is the precursor to receiving the Holy Spirit (**Ephesians 1:13**), and yet baptism is, too (**Acts 2:38**; cf. **Matthew 3:16**).

Are the scriptures at odds with themselves? Certainly not! The answer is simply this: In **Acts 16:31**, **Acts 10:43**, and **Ephesians 1:13**, the references to belief/faith include baptism. Baptism is part of the initial process of believing (putting one's trust) in Jesus. By obeying the command to be baptized, one's initial faith is completed, thus making it saving faith. This is why Paul said, *"For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of as you were baptized into Christ have put on Christ"* (**Galatians 3:26-27**).[1]

[1] The "For" at the beginning of **Galatians 3:27** is a translation of the Greek word "gar." According to The Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (BDAG), "gar" can serve as:

     (1) a "marker of cause or reason (for)"

     (2) a "marker of clarification (for, you see)"

Applying either definition to **Galatians 3:27** reveals that Paul is, in fact, saying that baptism played a role in the Galatians becoming sons of God through faith—that baptism did not follow their birth through faith into God's family but was actually part of it. And this agrees with what Jesus said: *"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit* (comp. **Acts 2:38**; **Titus 3:5**), *he cannot enter the kingdom of God."*