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Faith versus Sight

Faith! Who can fully measure or express the potential represented by that short, simple word? Perhaps the clearest way to bring faith's potential into focus is to examine two statements made by Jesus:

²⁶With God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26).

²³All things are possible to him who believes (Mark 9:23).

In each of these statements we find the words "*all things are possible.*" In the first passage they are applied to God; in the second they are applied to the one who believes. It is not too difficult, perhaps, to accept that all things are possible with God. Can we equally accept that all things are possible to the one who believes? Yet this is what Jesus tells us.

In practical terms, what does this mean? It means that, through faith, the things that are possible to God are made equally possible to the one who believes. Faith is the channel that makes God's possibilities available to us. Through faith, all that is possible to God becomes equally possible to us. No wonder that, from beginning to end, the Bible consistently emphasizes the unique and supreme importance of faith.

Problems of Translation

Before we go further with our study of faith, it will be helpful to clear up a linguistic misunderstanding that often causes difficulties in understanding faith. In English, we have two different words for faith: a noun, *faith*; a verb, to *believe*. The

connection between these two words is not always obvious. As a result, preachers sometimes try to make a distinction between “believing” and “having faith.” However, there is no basis for this distinction in the original Greek of the New Testament.

In Greek, the word for faith is *pistis*, and the word for believe is *pisteuo*. We see that the verb is formed directly from the noun. The stem of each word is made up of the same four letters—*pist*. As far as the Bible is concerned, believing is exercising faith. Conversely, exercising faith is believing.

When we look at the words that express the opposite of faith, we again find a difference between English and Greek. In English, the opposite of faith is unbelief. We have no such word as “unfaith.” But, in Greek, there is a direct connection between faith and its opposite. Faith is *pistis*; unbelief is *apistia*. (In Greek, the negative prefix “a” corresponds to the English prefix “un.”) The same four-letter stem *pist* occurs in both Greek words: faith, *pistis*; unbelief, *apistia*.

Also connected with this four-letter stem *pist*, we have the adjective *pistos*, which means faithful, believing. From this, the negative prefix “a” gives us the opposite adjective, *apistos*, which means unfaithful, unbelieving.

For the sake of clarity, we will set these five words side by side in two parallel columns:

	<u>Greek</u>	<u>English</u>
Noun:	<i>pistis</i>	faith
Noun:	<i>apistia</i>	unbelief
Adjective:	<i>pistos</i>	faithful, believing
Adjective:	<i>apistos</i>	unfaithful, unbelieving
Verb:	<i>pisteuo</i>	I believe

We see that all five Greek words are visibly linked by the stem *pist* that occurs in each of them. Altogether, these five words occur almost six hundred times in the

original text of the New Testament. On this basis alone, it is clear that these words represent a theme that is central to the Bible's total revelation.

Faith Defined

The eleventh chapter of Hebrews deals exclusively with the theme of faith. Its opening verse provides us with a definition of faith, as the term is used in the Bible. "*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*" (Hebrews 11:1 KJV).

This verse tells us two main things about faith. First, "*faith is the substance of things hoped for.*" Faith is so real that it is actually called a substance. The Greek word is *hupostasis*. It literally means "that which stands under" something else or "provides the basis for" something else.

The same word, *hupostasis*, occurs in Hebrews 1:3, where we are told that Jesus is "*the exact representation of the Father's nature.*" The word here translated "nature" is *hupostasis*. The meaning is that God the Father is the eternal, invisible, underlying reality, of which Jesus Christ the Son is the visible expression. Applying this meaning to Hebrews 11:1, we may say that faith is the "underlying reality" of things hoped for. Faith is real; faith is a substance.

Second, faith is "*the evidence of things not seen*" (Hebrews 11:1 KJV). The New American Standard Bible says, "*the conviction of things not seen.*" Regardless of which translation we prefer, the vital point is that faith deals with things we cannot see. Faith relates to the invisible.

Two verses later, the writer again stresses faith's relationship to the invisible:

³By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible. (Hebrews 11:3)

The writer here points a contrast between the things that are seen and the things

that are not seen, between the visible and the invisible. Our senses connect us to the visible world, to “*what is seen.*” But faith takes us behind the visible to the invisible—to the underlying reality by which the whole universe was formed: that is, the word of God.

Thus, faith relates to two eternal, invisible realities: to God Himself and to His word. Biblical faith has only these two objects. In secular speech, of course, we speak of faith in many other contexts. We can talk about having faith in the economy, in a medicine, or in a political leader. But faith is not used that way in the Bible. In the Bible, faith is related solely and exclusively to two realities we cannot see with the natural eye: to God and to God’s word.

By Faith, Not by Sight

The opposition between faith and sight is brought out by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:7: “*For we walk by faith, not by sight.*” If we walk by sight, we do not need faith. If we walk by faith, we do not need sight. Each excludes the other.

This is contrary to our natural way of thinking. The world says, “Seeing is believing.” But the Bible reverses the order: first we must believe, then we will see. This principle is so important that we will look at some passages of Scripture that illustrate it. In Psalm 27:13 David said, “*I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.*” Which came first, believing or seeing? Believing. What was true for David is true for all of us. If we cannot believe that we will see the goodness of the Lord, we will despair. The thing that keeps us from despairing is not what we see, but what we believe.

This agrees with the statement made about Moses in Hebrews 11:27: “*By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen.*” Nothing in Moses’ visible circumstances at this time could have given him any hope or encouragement. But in spite of all that was against him, he endured because he was able to see the unseen. How did he do this? By faith. Faith enables us to see the unseen and thus enables us to endure when the visible world offers us no hope or encouragement.

Now we turn to the record of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead in the eleventh chapter of John. We read:

³⁹ Jesus said, “Remove the stone.” Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to Him, “Lord, by this time there will be a stench; for he has been dead four days.”

⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, “Did I not say to you, if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”

(John 11:39–40)

What Jesus asked here of Martha, He asks of all who desire to see the glory of God. We must believe that we will see. We do not see first, then believe. We believe first; then, as a result of believing, we see. Faith comes before sight.

Here, then, is the basic conflict between the old nature and the new nature. The old nature demands to *see*, since the old nature lives by the senses. God has to deliver us from that old nature and that old way of life and bring us to a new nature and a new way of life. Then we will say, “I am content *not* to see. I do not walk by sight, but by faith.”

In the book of 2 Corinthians, we are challenged once more by the contrast between the visible and the invisible:

¹⁷ For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison,

¹⁸ while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:17–18)

Paul's language in these verses contains a deliberate paradox. He spoke about looking at things that are not seen. How can we do this? There is only one way—by faith!

There is great significance in the word “*while*”: “*while we look not at the things which are seen.*” It stresses the same lesson that Moses learned in his test of endurance. He learned that, in the providence of God, affliction serves a useful purpose for the believer. It forms and strengthens our character and prepares us for the eternal glory that lies ahead. But the lesson that the word “*while*” teaches us is this: affliction serves us only while we keep our eyes on the invisible realm. If we lose sight of it and become preoccupied with the world of time and of the senses, we are no longer able to receive the benefits that affliction is intended to provide for us.

So we are caught between two worlds: the temporal and the eternal. The temporal is what we can see; we contact it with our senses. But the eternal is the world God wants us to be at home in. And we can be at home in that world by only one means: faith. Faith is the one thing that connects us to the unseen realities of God and His word.

Summary

Faith lifts us above the realm of our own abilities and makes God's possibilities available to us. Faith connects us to two unseen realities: God and His word. As we maintain a relationship with God through faith, we are enabled to endure and to overcome the tests and the hardships that confront us in our daily lives. These, in turn, become opportunities for God to reveal His goodness and His glory.

There is an ongoing tension between faith and sight. Our old nature is at home in the world of the senses and it demands to see. As Christians, we need to cultivate the new nature, which is able to trust God and His word without demanding other evidence.