

Faith: Fictional or Factual?

What Is Biblical Faith?

Years ago, I took the driver's training class my high school offered. It involved actual driving a car provided by the driving school. There were three of us students in the car and the instructor. When it was my turn to take the wheel, I was certainly nervous but because my dad had let me drive around a bit with him in our car, I was confident I knew something about driving. I was instructed to drive along the main street in my hometown and I carefully motored about. All of a sudden, a car pulled out from a parking space on the side of the road and was in front of me. Without warning, the car I was driving stopped. This was long before self-driving cars, so I was shocked by it stopping. I turned to the instructor, confused and stunned but he was looking straight ahead. I asked him why the car stopped and he muttered that he stopped the car. It turned out that he had a brake pedal on his side of the car and when the car pulled out in front of me, he slammed on his brake. Did he have faith in my driving? He could have told me he did but after that, I knew by his actions he didn't. What we discover both from the Bible and our experiences is that faith means something. Real faith alters the way you live. Our big idea comes from the passage we are looking at today. Live by faith and be transformed.

In our passage, we have previously taken a close look at Nicodemus and Jesus' instructions to him. Now we are going to examine the type of faith Jesus insists you have if you are to be a part of the Kingdom of God. **Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.** (John 3: 14-16 NIV) As you can tell, everything hinges on believing in Jesus. But what does that mean? Before we move further, it must be noted that to have faith in Jesus means the same as believing in Him. Believe and faith come from the same Greek word in the New Testament. You are not speaking of something different when you bring up faith or belief. Biblically, they are identical. So what does believe in Jesus mean to Christ Himself? He put it this way. It is just like when Moses took a bronze snake and held it up on a pole while the people of Israel were in the wilderness. It was a terrible time for Moses. The people of Israel once again were complaining about God and Moses. Life on the trail to the Promised Land was not going as the Israelites or Moses expected. **...they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"** (Numbers 21: 5 NIV) Not grateful for the heavenly bread the Lord was providing and for some reason deciding that God would not give them the water they needed, the Israelites began to rebel against not only the leadership of Moses but even of God. Unwilling to let this continue, God's punishment was swift. **Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.** (Numbers 21: 6 NIV)

When the people saw what was happening and knew the deadly snakes were among them due to their own sinning, they cried out to God for mercy. **The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.** (Numbers 21: 7 NIV) It is a great sign when people realize they have sinned against God and turn to God to save them. Make no mistake. That is precisely what they were wanting. They were calling for God to save them. Perhaps not for eternal life but to keep them from dying from the deadly vipers that were all over the place. I just heard about a singer who was on a TV show who was killed by a snake that bit her when she was sleeping. This was not some needless worry on their part. The Israelites, all of them, the ones who knew they were sinners as well as those who didn't, were in deadly peril. God was merciful and gave them a way out of dying from the deadly vipers. **The Lord said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.** (Numbers 21: 8-9 NIV)

It is perhaps a detail worth noting that the historical record reads that anyone who was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake lived. It does not state that every one of the Israelites looked at the bronze snake after the first wave of deaths. Perhaps they all did but if human nature was then as it is now, it seems likely that many were skeptics and chose an alternative way of trying to survive the snakebites. The key point is not what the unbelievers did but the response of the believers and how they match those who gain eternal life. There are two aspects to this belief the survivors had. One, is that something in their brains clicked and they decided the only way to live after being bit was to look at the bronze snake up on the pole. They decided, for whatever reason, to trust the words of Moses. How each

person turned over in his or her brain the pros and cons of believing him and by implication God we don't know. What matters most for them is not the process that led to belief but the determination itself. They somehow decided to believe. Second, each one who lived turned that belief into action and looked up at the bronze snake. Nothing else was needed to survive. The rest was completely up to God. It is similar to deciding to believe a certain train will take you to the destination you want and the ticket you have been given will allow you to ride that train but then you must board the train if that belief is of any use to you. From that point forward, it is up to the train personnel and of course the train, to get you there. You did no work in getting to your destination but also, your belief in the train getting you there involved something, boarding the train.

In their heads, many of the Israelites may have thought that by turning and looking up at the bronze snake they would in theory save their lives, but that sort of belief was meaningless to them if they never actually looked up at the bronze snake. Jesus says that believing in Him for eternal life is just like the kind of belief that happened on that fateful day out in the desert. Unbelief has the opposite sense to it. When Jesus warned about lies that would be told of His return, He said don't believe it. **"So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the desert,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it."** (Matthew 24: 26 NIV) Notice the link between unbelief and inaction. In this case, if you don't believe the report, then you do not go out looking for His appearance. Behavior and belief, or in this case, unbelief go hand in hand. Jesus drove this point home regarding belief and behavior when He warned against wanting praise from others without doing anything to gain God's praise. **How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?** (John 5: 44 NIV) The implication is that it is impossible. Believing in Christ is never disconnected from the life of the one believing.

Belief that results in eternal life is transformational. It changes the way you live. It is with great humility that we consider Jesus' strong rebuke of those who do not obey Him. **"Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?"** (Luke 6: 46 NIV) There is a way of life among those who have believed and have eternal life. They do what Jesus tells them to do. Keep in mind that those who believed in the desert looked at the snake. There is a particular sort of belief that promises eternal life. It is of course belief in Jesus Christ for salvation and eternal life. The result of that belief, just as with the Israelites and the crisis with snakes, is changed behavior. Let us restate the promise of Jesus. **"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."** (John 3: 16 NIV) Eternal life is more than gaining heaven, it is a rebuilt and supernaturally transformed life that cannot be poisoned by death. When, like the Israelites in the desert, you believe God and trust Him with your life, there is a change in the way you live and that change is discernable. The change though is not what brings you eternal life. Faith in Christ to give you eternal life results in you being saved by Christ. Then God Himself makes you new and your behavior and your approach to life changes so that you show that you have the Holy Spirit living in and through you.

Belief has two requirements. Apprehension and Agreement. Without understanding what is being proposed you cannot believe and if you don't agree with it, you are not believing. Jesus made it clear what you must believe if you are to have eternal life. Believe He gives you eternal life and you have it. Then God transforms you into what the Bible calls a "new creation" and you immediately have the ability and the desire to do what Christ says to do because Christ is living within you, enabling you to carry out perfectly the will of God. Faith in Christ for your eternal life is the starting point for the life that is forgiven of all sin and results in entrance into God's Kingdom. Jesus called all those sorts of people sheep, His sheep and they are completely different from everyone else. Here is what He says of each one who has begun to believe in Jesus Christ for salvation. Those who are not the sheep of Christ do not believe in Him but those who do have eternal life. **Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand."** (John 10: 25-28 NIV) Let's return to our big idea. Live by faith and be transformed. Salvation is not for everyone but for those who believe in Christ for salvation, it is the greatest gift they will ever receive.