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The biblical concept of faith

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GRADUATION THESIS

THE BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF FAITH

by

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OUTLINE:

The Biblical Concept of Faith

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Faith the Fountain-head of doctrinal development.

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THE BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF FAITH

It has been the growing conviction of the writer that the basal concept of religious life and thought is the concept of Faith. Every great reformer in the history of the Christian Church has turned his reform on the edge of this concept. Out of it has sprung the break from ceremonialism and formalism and legalism. Out of it has come the awakening in the heart of man of the therein imbedded Essence of religion. Around it has gathered all that is simplest and most fundamental in religious experience.

It is because of this that we turn our attention to this theme. Faith is by no means an isolated religious concept. It extends its power over the whole range of life. It does not imply the intellectual agreement merely with any doctrine but as Rudolf Fuc en has said, "There is Embedded in it an ascent of the whole Existence of our nature, a longing for the heights and a progressive certainty of such heights, out of the Energy of the Divine Life." Thus faith is really the key to personal religious life. (

Moreover faith has a great significance when considered from the standpoint of doctrine. It is very largely through new statement and restatement of the meaning and Essence of faith that the body of theological doctrine is as large as it

is. Doctrine grows out of a historical situation which demands some authoritative statement of a principle. Thus when we arrive at the heart of this great concept Faith, we are at the fountain head of doctrinal development as well as of religious Experience.

It is our purpose to go to the Bible for our data and to trace historically, the development of this concept. It would be worthless to attempt in our limited compass an exhaustive exposition of faith as might be found therein. We must therefore choose the high points, the places where it seems to us faith finds its clearest and most penetrating Expression in the Old Testament. Then we shall advance into the New Testament and put ourselves under the general teachings of Jesus concerning faith. We shall end our treatise with a discussion of the distinctive elements of Paul's teaching about faith and its expression as theological doctrine. While much might be said as regards the viewpoint of the author of the Hebrews and of James and Peter, yet it is our conviction that in the teaching of Jesus and Paul is included all that is essential to a full exposition of this religious concept. We shall find that this historical treatment will reveal that the faith of the New Testament in its essentials accords with the faith of the Old Testament but that the New Testament builds upon the Old Testament exposition of it, and familiarizes and deepens its content, without changing its essence.

First, then, let us investigate the experience of Faith as revealed to us in the Old Testament. In going to the Old Testament for its conception of faith we must realize that the Old Testament writings are not the cause of the religion of the Old Testament, but are merely documents of its history. Back of the document is the experience. There is much faith in the Old Testament although the word faith is used comparatively seldom. The great Hebrew word expressing faith is אָמַן , from אָמַן , to believe, expressing fixedness, stability, steadfastness and reliability. Let us first look at the great passage in Genesis 15: 6. This passage is from the J or Jahvist document. This document has little interest in legislation but is concerned with the great narratives. J is a collector of traditions, narrator, poet, philosopher, religious teacher of his nation. It deals with the stories of the creator and of Paradise, with the deluge, the tower of Babel, the narratives of Abraham, Jacob and Joseph. Thus J really belongs to the prophetic literature in the spirit of its content. Different strata of J (see Knudson, "Introductory Notes on Old Testament Theology") are assigned to 850-650 B. C. The fact that this narrative belongs to the prophetic literature is significant in that the concept of faith finds its Old Testament climax in prophetic writing. Let us look specifically at this reference above cited. Gen. 15; 6, "And he believed (אָמַן) in Yahweh and he reckoned it to him as righteousness." This

belief was a belief that exhibited itself in action. It was to this extent a faith revealing the essence of the religion of the patriarchs. Here we have a straightforward open declaration of the faith principle which moved all the strong hearts of this patriarchal period. This one man is singled out by the writer as one worthy to embody the meaning of the faith principle. Here gives expression to his viewpoint in regard to all these narratives, that adherence to God is the standard of character judgement, and that this adherence is a personal experimental thing. Here we have faith utterly free from legalism. The law had not yet become a factor in Israel's history. It was simply a trustful acceptance of a promise utterly regardless of present seemingly almost insurmountable difficulties in attaining its fulfillment. But this fact is to be noted. As we delve deeper into Abraham's experience we see that the object of this faith is not the promise but the person of Yahweh, not the fact but the person, not a doctrine but a personality. The thought back of the word translated believed, suggests the thought of steadying oneself, by leaning on something. So here we see that faith is not an intellectual act merely. It grasps more than the intellect. It is an act of the whole self, it is a moral act and roots in the will and affections as well as in the intellect. Here then we have a clear and concrete expression of the way of salvation as it opened out before the patriarchs. There are no references in the Old

Testament to faith that are not distinctly esoteriological. Its end is always the Messianic salvation.

We turn our attention now to a second point where the concept of faith finds a strategic utterance. This is from the passionate heart of Isaiah. Here faith finds expression as the necessary condition of salvation. This passage, Isaiah 7: 9, undoubtedly came from Isaiah himself who was a public teacher in Judah between the years 740-701 B. C. (See Gray Introduction). This verse (which dates 701 B. C. acc to Box) may be translated in various ways. "If ye believe not, יִיְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ , surely ye abide not, secure, יִיְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ ," or "If ye will not believe surely ye shall not be established," or, one which brings out well the play on words, "If ye have not faith, ye cannot have staith." What is meant here by the concept faith? The root idea underlying all of these translations is the passion for fixity, for permanence. The historical situation appears to be uncertain as to the outcome. The evil plans of Syria and Ephraim against Judah will not be carried out, says the sentence of Yahweh,—so as far as the present is concerned Judah is safe. But Isaiah goes on to say the permanent safety of Judah depends upon a spiritual relationship to Yahweh. The secret of permanent fixity is faith in Yahweh,—quiet, unruffled, determined confidence in Him as the controller of history. The direct object of faith here seems at first sight to be the word of the prophet but on closer scrutiny it is seen to be the

word of Yahweh as it is prophecy is Yahweh's message to Ahaz. It is Yahweh back of the word to whom faith is to be directed. The only way, to use Alexander Laclaren's figure, to make things stable is to fasten them to something that is stable. The way to put assurance, certainty, calmness, fixity into life is by fastening oneself firmly to God by belief, i. e. by faith.

These words grow out of a sense of personal and national insufficiency. It was a critical period in Israel's history. The kingdom of Judah was being shaken. In such instances a nation hungers for fixity, for assurance. It was to Isaiah to point the way to national salvation thru faith in Yahweh. The prophet made his plea for faith with his face toward the future of the nation. Here again the passion of the Israelitish people for permanence centers in its Messianic passion for salvation. Duhm says that in this passage, the supreme importance of believing in Yahweh was first expressed. There is a distinction here to be made, however, which seems to me very important. The individual note did not enter very deeply into Isaiah's conception of Faith. It was more the nation's faith in Yahweh for which he was pleading. Even though the message was spoken to Ahaz it was to him as a representative of the nation. There was nothing here of the personal note to which we come in the New Testament when Christ says, "Thy faith hath saved thee." But the center of faith is in the nation just as everything related to Israel

"at this time centered there. Israel's deepest passion was its national passion. Its interpretation of Religion was a primarily national interpretation. The emphasis here then was upon national faith and it was distinctly prophetic in its emphasis on future hope. There are two other passages from the prophet Isaiah which help round out his conception of Faith. Isaiah 28: 16, "Behold I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone of sure foundation: he that believeth *יִשְׁתָּבֵט* shall not be in haste."

Isaiah 30: 15, "For thus said the Lord Jehovah the Holy One of Israel, In returning and rest shall ye be saved, in quietness *שָׁלוֹם* and in confidence *בְּיָקוּם* shall be your strength."

These references are directly in line with the interpretation of the more strategic statement in Isaiah 7: 9 and emphasize the thought that reliance upon God will result in not using any means that might seem contrary to the will of God.

This brings us to a third great Old Testament statement of faith. It comes to us in the prophecy of Habakkuk. This prophecy was written shortly after 605 B. C. and was occasioned by the arrival of the Chaldeans triumphing over the Israelites in Judah. Evidently the prophets advised submitting themselves to the Chaldean domination and thus yield themselves without reservation to the Divine plan working through history.

"Habakkuk's message is one of encouragement. In contrast with the puffed up soul of the Chaldeans he says in Habakkuk 2: 4, "The just shall live by his faith," or "The just shall live in his faithfulness *יִתְּנָה אֱמוּנָתוֹ* ." The idea here expressed is consistent with the outlook toward the future which so dominates the religion of the Old Testament. There must be quiet, persistent, waiting patience in a confident, trustful relationship to Yahweh which characterizes the life of a righteous man. Here however as in the other references already discussed the faith is not so much that of an individual as of a nation. Even the faith which the prophet feels beating in his breast is a faith that he views most valuable in its relationship to his nation. There is implied here a great conviction of the majesty, energy, and loving might of Yahweh. He is a God who rules through history. The nation which now seems so powerful, by the very traits upon which its power is built is to be undermined. Yahweh will achieve its downfall. Only the nation that trusts in Yahweh, only the nation of faith will endure and have permanence. But Habakkuk in his thought of faith stresses the expression of it in action. Faithfulness to task, to duty, to God goes hand in hand with trust in God. Faith expresses itself in faithfulness. Eislén says that this as an expression of living faith is not surpassed in the Old Testament.

In the three above critical passages of the Old Testament we have what might be called the high water Old Testa-

ment marks of faith in its active sense. These passages it seems to me come the nearest of any to a formulation of a definite statement regarding faith. There remain to be considered another type of Old Testament faith which comes very near to the conception of personal individual faith of the New Testament. This is the faith that comes to us through the Psalms.

There is at present much uncertainty among Biblical scholars regarding the date of the Psalms. Criticism is practically agreed that the theory of Davidic authorship is not well grounded. Some argue for an early date. But the main trend of opinion seems to argue for a post exilic date for the majority of the Psalms. If this be a correct hypothesis we have in the Psalms the latest development of the concept of faith in the Old Testament. Here we find not alone the national emphasis of faith but also an intense individualism. We feel instinctively the throb and passion of an individual confidence in Yahweh. The Psalms do not use the great Old Testament word for "believe" but the idea of trust or confidence in Yahweh is a very vital one in them. Is there anything in this latest expression of faith in the Old Testament which keeps it out of the category of the New Testament references to faith. We believe there is. The object of faith is indeed ultimately the same. It is God the Yahweh of Israel. The difference is to be found in the fact that for the most part the experience of faith to the psalmist was

momentary and irregular. There was no great continued confidence in Yahweh. The faith of the Psalmist was spasmodic and changeable. At times he saw God clearly but almost the next moment might find him in the valley of despair. Take the 51st (assigned to exile or later by Driver) Psalm. Here we have a true description of the consuming power of an evil conscience, a startling picture of human inability to escape the torments of guilt, and a passionate reliance on God to accomplish what humanity is unable to do. Or if we take the latter part of the 73rd Psalm (written not earlier than Jeremiah, see Driver) we have at first anxious fears dubiously expressed and then the soul of the Psalmist struggles thru. to the light as with a great throwing of himself over upon God he says, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." There is no continued persistent confidence in Yahweh.

What shall we say then in summing up the teaching of the Old Testament concerning the religious concept faith? It is the central element in vital religious experience. The national emphasis gives it a sweep and grandeur which the more developed individualism of many of the Psalms and the New Testament do not show. God is the supreme controller of nature and history in the interest of distant moral ends. Faith is the act of trust, the bent of man's active will in

the mood of steadfast patience, waiting for God to assert His right of way in history. Faith subjectively apprehends this Divine power. It has not come yet to an authoritative doctrinal statement. The word "to believe," indeed is used only in half its instances in a religious sense. But by being thus used to express the high religious faith of the Old Testament the word was prepared for its more extended and familiar New Testament use not alone in the expression of religious experience but in doctrinal statement as well. The Psalms thru their spirit of intense individualism prepared the way for the distinctly personal application of the religious concept faith which finds repeated expression in the New Testament.

We come now to the second division of our thesis. The religious concept of faith as conceived and taught by Jesus. We are here in the presence of the authoritative word concerning faith. Jesus' teaching "when viewed as a great system of thought," says Jno. Stuart Mill, "is on a par with the most complete philosophical and religious systems of thought which have been founded by men."...."About the life and sayings of Jesus there is a stamp of personal originality combined with profundity of insight, which, if we abandon the idle expectation of finding scientific precision where something very different is aimed at, must place the Prophet of Nazareth even in the estimation of those who have no belief in his inspiration, in the very first rank of the men of

sublime genius of whom our species can boast."

A word needs to be said regarding Jesus' relation to the Old Testament. Jesus did not in any sense break with the Old Testament. Harnack has summed up his relation to it pitifully and pertinently when he says, "Whatever sources of comfort and strength Christianity, even in its New Testament has possessed or does possess up to the present is for the most part taken from the Old Testament viewed from a Christian standpoint, in virtue of the impression of the person of Jesus." Jesus did not destroy the Old Testament but fulfilled it. This he did not by giving it "quantitative extension" as Wendt puts it but by "qualitative renewal." His concept of faith was built on the Old Testament concept. The Old Testament was the source of the knowledge of Faith. The knowledge of faith was first and foremost the knowledge of God conceived of as depicted in the Old Testament, one, supermundane, spiritual almighty, creator and governor of the world, and therefore the Lord, a God of goodness and redemption. Christ brought to perfection faith in God, by mediating thru His revelation that God the Father was God the creator and redeemer. Thus the range and contents of the revelation of salvation as given in Jesus perfectly coincides with the range and contents of the will of God himself concerning salvation. We cannot sever Christianity from the Old Testament. As Harnack well says, "Christianity has to sacrifice its dearest possession" if such is attempted.

This dearest possessor is the belief that the God of creation is also the God of Redemption. Yet there was a distinct difference in the concept of faith as taught by Jesus, and the Jewish concept of faith. The whole temper of Jewish religion at the time of Christ's coming was legalistic. We have spoken at some length of the intense individualistic piety of the Psalms. Yet even some of the late Psalms were overlaid with this legalistic spirit which had its historical origin in the legal developments following upon the return of Israel from exile. The God of Israel had come to be thought of as afar off. In most Jewish piety there was a sense of fear of the far off God. Now and then as we have shown, the great soul of a Psalmist would find the clouds breaking away and he would get a glimpse of the clear blue of God's real nature. Then the momentary vision was again overclouded. There was no continued sustained trust and confidence in God. Even among the loftiest religious spirit, faith in God was uncertain and alternating. Jesus came with the dominating experience of his life, that of utter, absolute trust in God as a Father. Christ did not teach faith as a doctrine but simply as an attitude, a bearing of the whole life toward God. He knew the immensity of God's power and He enjoined upon men the disposition which includes both the attitude of spirit toward God and the personal acknowledgment of His infinite love and power.

The theme of Jesus' teaching was the Kingdom of God.

The conditions of entrance were two: First, repentance, --
 Second, Faith. We confine ourselves to the Synoptic teaching. What according to the Synoptic teaching did Jesus mean by faith? He gives us no formal definition yet he does not leave us in doubt as to its character or its potency in religious experience. He began his message with a challenge to faith, "Repent and believe (*ΠΙΣΤΕΥΕΤΕ*) in the Gospel." To the woman who in love washed His feet with her tears He said, "Thy faith (*πίστις*) hath saved thee, go in peace." Whenever he responded to a trusting attitude by curing temporal disease as in the case of Blind Bartimaeus, the Syrophenician woman's daughter, and the woman with the bloody issue, he showed that no divine benefit would be denied faith and that faith is the key to the kingdom. "All things," He says, "are possible to Him that believeth" (*ΠΙΣΤΕΥΟΝΤΙ*). In Christ's thought we cannot separate repentance and faith. The two are but different aspects of the same experience. Repentance is the negative, faith is the positive aspect. The positive aspect is prior to the negative. Faith, then, is a gift of God by which man assents to a higher order of life in order that he may have strength to turn from the lower. As one has beautifully put it, "Faith is a gift God lays in the lap of the soul." Faith has dynamic force as Christ distinctly teaches in the illustration of the mustard seed. The object of Faith is God. Christ always directs men to faith in Him. Frequently he directs men to

faith in "inself but it is always in His mind that this is essentially faith in God. We must think of Christ, " *ὡς περὶ Θεοῦ*." Faith in Christ is Faith in God. The truer conception I can gain of Christ's thought of faith is that of the disposition of the heart toward God. He develops inward character of faith, through insisting again and again upon a childlike attitude of trust in the Heavenly Father, thru illustration of parental love and of the prayer attitude of the unassuming publican. Faith in the thought of Jesus was the gift of God, not attained through striving but given because of desire, "a faithful humble earnest spirit of self committal to God." Moreover, it was the life and teaching of Jesus that brought faith in God into the reach of the ordinary man. Marté in his "The Religion of the Old Testament" has strongly expressed this thought, "since Jesus walked on earth there are not merely isolated individuals raised above the spiritual stature of average men, who feel that God is the author and Lord of their inner life, and that they are under an irresistible compulsion to do His will. A whole multitude of very simple folk may now be found who feel the love and the strength of their heavenly Father." Then too Jesus brought into clear and experimental expression the intense individualism of the experience of faith. It was not the faith of a nation but the faith of individual men toward which he directed his words. Thy faith hath saved thee" was the spirit of his

view of faith. It was an experience intensely personal. He revealed to men the tremendous spiritual forces at their personal command through the power of faith. Ewald has said, "All the accumulated reminiscences of the necessity and super-
 eminent power of faith would have been ultimately without
 abiding result had not Christ first unfolded the supreme
 power of faith which is possible to man. He lived in it as
 the element of His power, and knew most intimately its all-
 conquering might."

The adoption of faith as the supreme condition of entrance into the Kingdom of God points toward Christian universalism. The faith of the Old Testament was available not for the world, but for a limited portion, for the race of Israel. This limited standpoint to be sure was overreached now and then by some spirit who had caught a loftier conception of God, but for the most part their thought of faith was side-bound. Christ by making faith the sufficient condition of Salvation lifted the boundary and made the experience accessible to all men everywhere.

We have shown the reason for a study of the Biblical concept of faith. We have considered historically the growth of the concept of faith through the Old Testament as illustrated in the thought and experience of the Patriarchs, the Prophets, Isaiah and Habakkuk, and the Psalmists, of Israel. We have shown the strong points of their concept and have dwelt to some extent upon their limitations as well. We

have advanced into the New Testament and have tried to show in what relationship Christ stood to the leading spirits of the Old Testament, as well as the distinctive points of his teaching in regard to the experience of Faith. Thus far we have dealt with religious experience. Although now and then a writer in the passion of his belief speaks almost dogmatically as does Isaiah in verse 9 of chapter 7 yet his belief does not become formulated into a doctrine. It remains for us to consider the Pauline view of faith. Here it is that we are to find faith coming upon the stage of religious development in the garb of a doctrine. Let it be borne in mind, however, The religious experience of faith is primary. Not only is it primary in significance. It is primary in chronology of personal religious growth. The reality of experience finds expression in doctrine only when some external need calls it into the fray. Paul's great doctrine of faith, however, rested primarily and fundamentally on Paul's experience of Faith. His concept of faith took the form of the doctrine of justification by faith when because certain Judaizing Christians denied his authority he was forced to define the prophetic term faith and turn its creative force against the Pharisaic conception of religious merit.

What then are the distinctive features of Paul's justification by faith. Paul went to the root of the great conception of faith first given expression by the Hebrew Prophets. They conceived of faith not so much as the gift of

God, but as the result of human achievement. Paul conceived it as free gift of God's grace. The motive of salvation is God's mercy to the undeserving. Faith is the disposition which the work of the Holy Spirit makes possible and the condition of receiving God's grace. Faith means facing in the right direction. It is admitted that Paul's doctrine of justification by faith centered in Christ's work particularly as consummated in His death. There is here the view that Christ's death met the demands of divine character and furnished a powerful incentive to faith. Then too Paul finds in the resurrection of Christ another powerful incentive to summon men to faith. Paul used the term justification in its objective judicial sense. It means the bringing of a man into a proved standing before God. This is accomplished solely by faith in God. Considered from the standpoint of the subjective relationship justification becomes reconciliation. The terms here used are peculiar to Paul although thus far there is really nothing new in his doctrinal. There is a new element, however, in his conception or at any rate a deeper stressing of a thought already intimated in Christ's teaching. This is the mystic union with Christ. This is practically what faith means in its essence, to Paul. This finds its best expression in Galatians 2: 20, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God,

who loved me and gave himself up for me."

This mystic element in Paul's experience is really his contribution to the concept of faith. Paul differed from Christ in not stressing repentance. Yet even Christ's thought of faith includes repentance, hence we have no vital difference here in their concepts of faith. The consequence of this union of the believer with Christ is a lively sense of sonship. Here we come to a lofty note in Paul's conception of uniting faith. "Religion in its highest and purest form," says Dr. Sheldon, "is a religion of sonship." Faith as conceived by Paul issued from the center of man's personality. "With the heart man believeth unto righteousness," was his creed. Thus it is more than a receptive attitude, it is an active, energetic principle that expresses itself in love. It seems to me that Paul's conception of faith in its essence is the same as that of the Old Testament. It is different in form and theory but the life back of the term is essentially the same. I cannot agree with Deissman who says in speaking of Paul's idea of Faith, "He (Paul) imagined it was contained in the Bible and considered outwardly he was right. In reality though his idea of faith is altogether new. No one would think of identifying the *πίστις* of the Septuagint with the *πίστις* of Paul." But the great idea of thorough self committal to God is the same in both the Old Testament conception and the Pauline conception. In the Pauline conception it is self committal to God in Christ.

The Biblical interpretation of faith has been narrowed in many ways. It has been narrowed into:

- a. Bare assent to a creed.
- b. Bare trust and confidence in a Divine person.
- c. Subjective assurance claiming to be its own evidence.
- d. Vague feeling.
- e. Cheerful optimistic outlook upon the world.
- f. Implicit obedience and submission to authority.

But real faith cannot be narrowed. It grips the whole personality, intellect feelings and will. It is founded upon a deep seated religious instinct. "The testimony of the Holy Spirit is the response of our inmost personality to the external stimulus supplied by the inspired literature. This testimony is the primary ground of Faith." "Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God."

We have seen a gradual development in tracing the historical growth of faith as a Religious concept. It started in unformulated action, it grew into a high water mark in the prophetic emphasis, it became individualized and deepened thru the Hebrew poets and singers. It found its simplest, most natural and most experimental expression in the life and teaching of Jesus. It culminated in Paul's somewhat complex but vital doctrinal expression well embodied in the phrase, "Justification by Faith."