

Faith



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 6:10–18; Hebrews 11; James 2:18, 19; 1 Pet. 1:3–8.*

Memory Text: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (*Ephesians 2:8, 9, NIV*).

Faith is not to be confused with rational conviction. Faith in the biblical sense is not based primarily on our reason (even though it is not unreasonable or irrational!); nor is it based on our emotions (though emotions do play a role). Faith is a deep-rooted assurance that affects the entire person. Faith is a principle that governs the life. Faith is the means by which we reach out and grab hold of the promises of a God we can't see yet we know is there.

Hebrews 11:1 speaks about the “substance” of our faith. William G. Johnsson, an expert on Hebrews, suggests that the best translation is, “Faith is the title deed to what we hope for, the certainty of what we do not see.”—*Hebrews, The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1994), p. 204.

The Week at a Glance: Faith is the guiding principle in the life of a Christian. It's how we are to live and to relate to God and to others. However important an intellectual assent to doctrines is, faith is so much more than just that. This week we'll look at how much more.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 11.

Faith—a Gift From God

What is faith?

A simple definition could read something like this: “Faith is a confident and obedient trust in the reality, power, and love of God as revealed in His acts and in His promises to us.”

What a wonderful gift to have in a terribly fallen and broken world such as ours. No wonder many believe that faith is the most wonderful of all gifts humans could have.

Now, the question is, Have you ever tried to discover where your faith originated? Why is it that you have faith in God and in others you know don’t? Was it your upbringing? Did you have believing parents? Have you always attended church? Did your study of the Bible, and your reading of books about the Bible, convince you that there is a God who loves you? Did you find satisfying philosophical arguments that prepared you for the “leap” of faith? In the final analysis, faith is a miracle, a gift from God.

How does the apostle Paul underline the gift-character of faith? *Eph. 2:8.*

One thing is sure: Just as we cannot be fully human without love, we cannot be what we are intended to be without faith. “ ‘Without faith it is impossible to please God.’ . . . Note that Hebrews does not teach that without faith it is difficult to please God, or that without faith it will take a long time to satisfy Him. To the contrary, it claims that it is *impossible*. In short, faith has no substitute. It is by faith that God’s heroes lived in the past, and it is by faith that His people must live today.”—George R. Knight, *Exploring Hebrews: A Devotional Commentary* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 2003), p. 198.

How can we position ourselves in a way that prepares us for the gift of faith? That is, what changes can we make in our lives to make us more receptive to that gift? *Rom. 10:17; see also Heb. 11:6.*

Sometimes you hear people say that they wish they had faith. What would you advise such people? What kind of changes might they need to make in order to be more receptive to receiving the gift? See *Mark 9:24.*

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Ephesians 2:8*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: That faith is more than just belief but an experience of trust and certainty.

Feel: Your faith grow stronger through the study of the Bible and through a relationship with Jesus.

Do: Let faith be the guiding principle in your life.

▶ **Lesson Outline:**

I. Finding Faith (*Hab. 2:4*)

A Faith is more than just believing in a truth; it is living by that truth. How does your faith guide your actions every day?

B Faith matures through study of the Scriptures and through personal experience. What is the basis of your faith? Why do you believe the way you do?

II. Living Faith (*Hebrews 11*)

A Hebrews 11 often is referred to as the faith chapter. It reads like a “Hall of Fame” of the faithful: from Abel to Gideon, those of great faith are noted here. What specific traits set these people apart? How can we aspire to be like them?

B Hebrews 11:6 says it is impossible to please God without faith. Why is it so hard to accept the gift of faith? What makes us waver at times?

III. Evidencing Faith (*James 2:14–17*)

James tells us that faith without deeds is dead. What are some ways you can let your faith be evident in your actions?

▶ **Summary:** Our faith experience should serve as our guide through life. By studying the Bible and developing a relationship with Christ, we can let our faith manifest itself in all aspects of our lives.

The Basis of Our Faith

A famous English hymn that has been translated in countless languages reminds us, “My hope is built on nothing less / Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness” (*The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, no. 522). It is important that we never forget this truth. Jesus Christ is the ultimate foundation and source of our faith. But even though the gift of faith is a mystery that remains beyond our comprehension, we have been given some insights into how faith is awakened and strengthened. Some men and women in Bible times had a sudden experience that started them on the journey of faith. Paul is probably the most prominent example. Others tell of a much more gradual awareness of God’s leading in their life, which brought focus and direction in their pilgrimage of faith. No doubt, experience is an essential and powerful component of our spiritual life. But faith also must have content, and the revelation provided in the Scriptures plays the major role in establishing us in our faith.

What role do the Scriptures play in the faith experience of the believer? *John 5:39, 2 Tim. 3:15.*

Clearly, the Scriptures are of extreme importance, and if we neglect them it will be at our own peril. But how the Scriptures exactly help to awaken and build our faith cannot be expressed in any human formula. Not even the famous faith definition of Hebrews 11 provides this. “Hebrews 11:1 doesn’t give us a definition of *pistis* [the Greek word for faith] so much as a description of the way faith works. Certainly the apostle isn’t advancing a psychological explanation of faith. Rather, he sets out the two cardinal abilities that faith makes possible—turning hope into reality and the unseen into sight.”—William G. Johnsson, *Hebrews*, The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier, p. 205.

What does James 2:18, 19 tell us about the character of faith? Why is faith more than intellectual assent to belief in the existence of God and other doctrines?

Why is Bible reading a life-changing experience for some people while others claim that it “does nothing” for them? What would you advise a person who reads the Bible and enjoys it as literature but claims not to hear the voice of God speaking in it?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Faith is trust in God that makes the Christian life possible. As with love, we can't manufacture it for ourselves; God must give it to us.

Just for Teachers: In this lesson, we focus on the necessity of faith to the Christian life and how we can build faith in ourselves and others. You will want your students to have a working understanding of what faith is, why it's important, and how it relates to their own lives.

The Greek philosopher Zeno famously argued in his “arrow paradox” that an arrow would never reach its target. His argument turned on the assumption that every object occupies a space that is just its own size. So, at every point in its flight, the object is “at rest.” Because the object is at rest, it is not moving, even though it appears that way. In this sense, it is indistinguishable from a motionless arrow in the same position. Thus, Zeno concluded, motion is an illusion.

According to Zeno's logic, then, we could shoot an arrow at someone's chest and safely predict that it would never pierce the heart. Right? Unfortunately, we'd be dead wrong—as would be our target. Regardless of how logical Zeno's arguments may be, there is little doubt that anyone would be willing to volunteer for target practice to prove him right—especially Zeno (were he still alive).

Yet, Zeno's paradox was meant to contradict, through logic and reasoning, some false ideas about the way people thought the universe worked. Since then, there have been a number of mathematical and philosophical attempts to solve his paradox about why the arrow reaches its target, even though, logically, it shouldn't. (See Josh Paete, “Zeno's Paradoxes,” article at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arrow_paradox.)

In the same way, faith also poses a paradox of its own for the Christian. We don't know how or why the “reason to believe” becomes saving faith, but we know it does. But first, we must aim at the target: to know Jesus as our personal Savior.

Discuss With the Class: What circumstances, situations, discussions, books, sermons, and so forth, led you to have faith? At what point did knowledge about Christ become faith in Christ, and what did it feel like? What influences in your life now aim you toward Christ?

CONTINUED ►

Exercising Faith

In their telling of the stories of Christ's healing miracles, the Gospel writers emphasized that the underlying factor was not magic but faith. The people who were healed were challenged to exercise their faith. " 'According to your faith will it be done to you,' " Jesus said (*Matt. 9:29, NIV*). Extraordinary experiences that carry an undeniable stamp of miraculous divine intervention do not always result in faith, however. The truth is that many people find ways of explaining such divine interventions away.

Read Luke 16:30, 31. What important point can we take from here?

Our faith will be strengthened by the experience of seeing God at work in our own lives and in the lives of others, but our faith often will precede God's interventions in our life. Faith will expect God to show His hand. God has promised that He will act through us and on our behalf if we have faith in Him. In that trusting faith we must take Him at His word.

How do Romans 1:17; Galatians 5:6; James 2:17, 18; and 1 John 5:4, 5 reflect various aspects of this "living through faith"?

What is, on the other hand, the tragic result when faith is absent?
Rom. 11:20, Heb. 3:19.

The context of Romans 11:20 makes it clear that Paul was speaking about the ancient Hebrews, who had received the promise of salvation in a covenant relationship with Him. They could have experienced the abundant life in Christ that faith brings to all who exercise it, but their experience, and failure, is a clear reminder to us that "without faith it is impossible to please God" (*Heb. 11:6, NIV*).

Though your faith is a gift, what good reasons do you have for it? Also, even more important, what are practical ways in which you can strengthen your faith? At the same time, what are sure ways of losing it?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED► **STEP 2—Explore****Bible Commentary**

Overview: Without faith, it is impossible to please God (*Heb. 11:6*). This statement would be discouraging, except that by definition *faith* is something that can be achieved in no other way than to have God give it to us. All we have to do is reach out to take it (*Eph. 2:8*).

I. Invisible to Visible (*Review with your class Hebrews 11:1–3.*)

Faith, in order to be such, is the ability to believe in things that aren't immediately apparent to the senses. When the Christian believes and trusts in God, the results of that faith make themselves known in the real world, coming from what is, to all appearances, nothing.

These things may include a marked change in the character and orientation of the individual, answers to prayer, or positive results from decisions that seem far-fetched or disadvantageous by worldly standards—decisions made solely on the basis of faith or the sense that it was what God wanted one to do.

The author of this week's lesson compares this life change to God's creation of the world itself, which, after all, brought the universe into existence from nothing.

Consider This: Ask class members to share past experiences of having to maintain faith in God when apparently there was no evidence to support it.

II. The Gift of Faith (*Review with your class Ephesians 2:8.*)

When we refer to faith as a gift, we come up against the popular concept of faith as belief in a set of propositions of varying degrees of plausibility. People believe in all sorts of things, and just about everyone believes in something that isn't subject to rational or empirical proof.

But this is not the faith that is referred to here. Biblical faith is a result of the encounter with an infinitely good and trustworthy—that is to say, faithful—God. The gift of faith is truly the gift of God, because to truly

CONTINUED ►

Growing in Faith

Faith will increase if, when brought in contact with doubts and obstacles, we press on, claiming the promises of God regardless of how we might feel at any given moment or regardless of how hostile the circumstances might be. Faith is more than a feeling; it's a principle that transcends the fickleness of human emotions. Faith is doing what we know God asks us to do even though we don't feel like doing it.

If you are growing in grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ, you will improve every privilege and opportunity to gain more knowledge of the life and character of Christ; that is, you will do everything you can to grow in grace and increase in faith.

Faith in Jesus will grow as you become better acquainted with Him. This can happen by dwelling upon His life and love. You cannot dishonor God more than to profess to be His disciple while keeping yourself at a distance from Him.

What challenge did Peter hold out to the believers? *2 Pet. 3:18*.

How had the church in Thessalonica lived up to that challenge? *2 Thess. 1:3*.

And how does the “shield of faith” help you to grow spiritually? How does faith relate to the rest of the “armour of God” as described in *Ephesians 6:10–18*?

The goal of the Christian is to become mature in faith. This is a life-long process. While we experience the blessing of growth and “stand firm in the faith” (*1 Cor. 16:13, NIV*), we may at times wonder why others are still “weak” (*Rom. 14:1*). There is often a tendency to forget that it also has taken most of us considerable time before we arrived at where we are today spiritually. But whatever our reaction may be, it never should be one of pride and judgment (*1 Cor. 10:12*). God is the One who makes every seed of faith sprout, and He also is to be credited for any growth that takes place in our spiritual life. Yet, while that is a truth that must never be forgotten, we also must remember that by our personal choices we can help create the right kind of environment in which spiritual growth can take place.

Are there associations you have, places you visit, or certain kinds of media you expose yourself to that negatively impact your faith? If so, how willing are you to give them up? The answer depends on how important your faith really is to you.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

know God is to trust Him. But in order to receive the gift of faith, we must make ourselves available to God.

Consider This: How can we better position ourselves to receive the gift of faith or increase what we have been given?

III. Phoning It In *(Review with your class Hebrews 11:6 and Romans 1:17.)*

“Phoning it in” is a phrase used by actors for a performance that technically is correct but obviously lacking in feeling or conviction. We can compare that to times when the Christian life is without faith. Without faith, we can’t please God, because we aren’t sure He exists and, therefore, we can’t love or trust Him.

Christians can go through the motions, but they will lack the conviction and joy that come from knowing why they are doing so. Because the Christian life is a long-term relationship, not a one-minute radio spot, eventually the person not anchored to Christ through faith will wander off to do something more immediately gratifying. And losing us to the world, the flesh, and the devil is what really hurts God.

Consider This: Most of us have had moments when we felt as if we merely were going through the motions of a Christian life, without faith. What or who helped you to find the way back?

► STEP 3—Practice

Just for Teachers: Encourage your students to use these questions to think about faith as it manifests itself in their lives.

Thought Questions:

1 An adage states that “seeing is believing.” The eleventh century theologian Anselm of Canterbury wrote, “For I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this too I believe, that ‘unless I believe, I shall not understand’ (Isa. 7:9).” —Anselm of Canterbury, at <http://satucket.com/lectionary/Anselm.htm>. Discuss the ways in which faith deepens our knowledge of Christ.

2 What is the role of doctrine in the life of faith?

Faith in a Person

Doctrines are important. When we say that we believe in God, we will want to know more about God, and we will be eager to absorb what He has revealed to us. It only is natural that we want to provide a structured account of what we believe about our Creator and His dealings with us, and we want to be sure that we know His will. But though we believe that the doctrines of our church are true, our faith is anchored, not in a doctrinal system alone, but in Jesus. The doctrines are not an end in and of themselves. The doctrines help us better understand Jesus and what He has done for us.

In a sense, the role of doctrines in the Christian faith may be compared to the role of grammar. We can communicate through language only because there is a grammatical structure in the words we say and write. Similarly, we give a structure to the content of our faith through the doctrines. Anselm, a medieval theologian, spoke the famous words that theology is faith that seeks to understand itself.

What does the New Testament tell us about the importance of sound doctrine? *1 Tim. 4:16, Titus 2:1.*

Sound doctrine is essential, but doctrine and theology that remain lifeless theory can save no one. One even can be a theologian without being a believer. Faith, ultimately, is not just holding a number of beliefs as biblically correct but is trust in the Person of whom these doctrines speak.

How is salvation in this life and the life beyond connected with faith in the Source of life? *John 3:36, 6:35.*

What is the fundamental conviction on which the church is built? *Matt. 16:13–19.*

The passage in Matthew 16 often has been used as proof that the apostle Peter should be considered the founder of the Christian church. This idea finds no biblical support. On the contrary, Christ is the Stone on which the church is built. (*See 1 Pet. 2:4–8.*) And it is the faith in this Stone—the unshakable conviction that Jesus, the Son of God, is our Savior—that makes the church what it is, not a human institution but the church of God.

Someone says, “I believe in Jesus, believe in the teachings, yet sometimes I can’t help struggling with doubt.” What would you say to that person? What help and counsel could you give?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Application Questions:**

- 1 How does God work through people to build others' faith?
- 2 Being as imperfect as we are, faith often coexists in us with doubt. How can we acknowledge the doubt and make sure faith has the upper hand?

► **STEP 4—Apply**

Just for Teachers: This week we have learned that faith is something separate from both intellectual acceptance and from our own efforts. Yet, we do have a role in cultivating and strengthening the faith God gives us. The following activity is meant to emphasize how our actions and thoughts can build or diminish faith.

Give each class member a sheet of paper. Ask the students to draw a line down the middle, creating two columns. At the top of one, have them write “faith building.” At the top of the other, have them write “faith diminishing.” Have the students consult together in groups of about three to make lists in each column. Invite each group to discuss their conclusions.

Just for Teachers: Make sure to emphasize that this exercise is not necessarily a matter of drawing a line between “good” things that “good” people do, say, or think and “bad” things done, said, or thought by “bad” people. First Corinthians 10:23 is instructive in this context.

Or, as an alternative, consider the following discussion topic and exercise instead: media has become important in the lives of many people today, and the life of faith is no exception to this influence. We tend to focus on the negative here, and certainly there is no lack of that. But how can music, film, and so forth help and guide us in our journey of faith, as well as hinder and mislead us?

The week before you teach this lesson, invite class members to bring in CDs, DVDs, and so on that have encouraged or strengthened their faith. It probably is most convenient (though not strictly necessary) if you have means to play selections from some of these materials. Best of all might be if some of your class members are willing to sing or otherwise perform these songs as a way of closing the class.

Further Study: “Peter exhorts his brethren to ‘grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.’ 2 Peter 3:18. When the people of God are growing in grace, they will be constantly obtaining a clearer understanding of His word. They will discern new light and beauty in its sacred truths. This has been true in the history of the church in all ages, and thus it will continue to the end. . . .

“By faith we may look to the hereafter and grasp the pledge of God for a growth of intellect, the human faculties uniting with the divine, and every power of the soul being brought into direct contact with the Source of light. We may rejoice that all which has perplexed us in the providences of God will then be made plain.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, pp. 112, 113.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Hebrews 11 provides a gallery of heroes of faith. Notice, though, how flawed in character and actions just about every one of them were. What encouragement can you draw from their mistakes and sins when you yourself are tempted to give up faith because of your own sins and flaws?
- 2 Many of us have at some time or another gone through a crisis of faith and have come out of this experience renewed. If this has happened to you, how did you survive the crisis? What can you do when it appears that members of your family or local church members are in the midst of a similar struggle? What did you learn from your own experience that could help them?
- 3 What are the challenges to your faith? Are they of an intellectual nature, that is in the area of science versus religion? Or are they related to the environment in which you live and work, or where you find your recreation? Or possibly in the area of relationships? Why is it important to meet these challenges head-on?
- 4 You don’t need faith to believe in what you can prove; you need faith to believe in what you can’t prove. Why is it important to realize that regardless of all the evidence we have for our beliefs, there will be things we just don’t understand?

Summary: Faith is experience. It has to do with certainty. And with trust. The Scriptures play a role in the awakening, the strengthening, and the sustenance of faith. But faith isn’t just belief; it is a principle that guides how we live our lives before God and others.