

# Faith

## SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

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Faith is the ground on which every other virtue stands. A servant without faith may still work, still speak, still organize — but nothing he does will carry weight in the kingdom, because the kingdom answers only to the Lord in whom we believe. In this lesson we look at faith not as a feeling but as a living trust: a trust with a face (the face of our Lord Jesus Christ), a history (the long line of witnesses in Hebrews 11), a shape (faith working through love), a cost (faith tested in the furnace), and a fruit (the quiet confidence that God is faithful, whatever the hour looks like). The Church has always known that the servant stands or falls on this single thing. Let us look at it carefully, and let us come to the end of the lesson not only understanding faith, but wanting it more than we wanted it when we began.

### What Scripture Means When It Says 'Faith'

There is a sentence in the Letter to the Hebrews that the Church has returned to for twenty centuries because, in a single line, it gives us the whole working definition of faith.

*“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”*

Hebrews 11:1, NKJV

Two words carry the weight of the verse. Faith is 'substance' — the Greek word is hypostasis, the same word the Church would later use for the three divine Persons. It means underlying reality, the thing that is actually there beneath appearances. And faith is 'evidence' — a legal term, the kind of proof that stands up in court. Put the two together and we have a startling claim: what we cannot see with our eyes is, in fact, more solid than what we can. The unseen Lord is more real than the seen room we are sitting in. His promises are more certain than the newspaper on the table. Faith is the faculty that lets us live as though that were true, because it is true.

This means faith is not, first of all, a feeling we manage to generate. It is not the strength of our convictions. It is a trust in a Person who has spoken, and whose word has been shown to be reliable. The writer of Hebrews, having given us the definition, immediately stops defining and starts remembering. He calls up Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Sarah and Moses and Rahab, and lets us watch how faith actually looked in the flesh. In every case, faith meant taking God at His word and acting accordingly, sometimes over decades, usually in the dark.

*“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.”* Hebrews 11:13, NKJV

Notice the progression: they saw, they were assured, they embraced, they confessed. Faith did not finish its work in their lifetimes. They did not receive what was promised. And yet they held on,

because the God who had promised was Himself the substance of their hope. For our own service this is a deep comfort. Much of what we labor for we will not live to see. The students we teach today may not visibly bear fruit for a generation. That does not make our service less fruitful. It makes it more clearly an act of faith.

### Faith Has a Face

It matters enormously that Christian faith is not faith in 'God in general.' It is faith in a particular Person: the Lord Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. The very next verse after the great roll-call of Hebrews 11 turns our eyes to Him.

*“Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”*  
Hebrews 12:1–2, NKJV

He is the author of our faith — its beginning, the One who first kindled trust in our heart. And He is the finisher — the One who will bring that same trust to its completion, so that on the last day we will not be left with a partial work. Between those two poles, the whole of our life is the race.

This face-to-face shape of faith is what distinguishes Christian trust from every other kind. We do not merely believe that God exists. The demons also believe, James reminds us, and they tremble (James 2:19). We believe in our Lord Jesus Christ, who has a voice we have heard, wounds we have seen, a Body we have received. Faith, for the servant, is therefore always personal. It is the posture of a heart that has come to know a Person and has decided to trust Him — not only with Sunday, but with the whole of the coming week, and the whole of the coming trial, and the whole of the coming death.

*“Faith is the eye that seeth the Lord; faith is the ear that heareth Him; faith is the feet that go unto Him; faith is the hand that receiveth Him. But the Lord whom faith beholdeth is Himself the gift that faith receiveth.”* St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews XXI.4

### Faith That Works Through Love

St. Paul, in the letter to the Galatians, gives us the shape of a living faith in one unforgettable phrase.

*“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.”* Galatians 5:6, NKJV

Three nouns and a participle: faith, working, through love. Faith is not static. It is not kept in a jar on a shelf. Faith works — it moves, it reaches, it carries. And the channel through which it moves is love. A faith that does not flow into love for the brother in front of us has not yet begun to do its proper work. Conversely, works that do not flow out of faith are not yet what the Lord is asking of us either; they are our own labor, kept under our own name.

This is the point St. James presses so gently and firmly in his epistle. Faith and works are not rivals; they are the two sides of a single living reality. A faith that never shows is not a faith that has yet become fully itself.

*“What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? ... Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”* James 2:14, 17, NKJV

For the servant this is practical and daily. Faith that has become love will show up as the ride offered to the tired parishioner, the patient lesson prepared for the restless student, the prayer said quietly for the one who hurt us, the phone call made to the absent one. None of these things, taken individually, will feel heroic. Put them together across a lifetime of service, and we have the picture of a faith that has actually been working.

*“Faith is not perfected in words alone, but in the works that proceed from it. For as the body without the spirit is dead, so is faith without its corresponding life. He who loves, already believes; and he who truly believes cannot but love.”* St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of John, Book IV

## Faith in the Darkness

If faith is the substance of things hoped for, it is because we often hope for things we cannot yet see. There are seasons in the life of every servant when the Lord seems to withdraw His felt nearness. The prayer goes dry. The Scripture reads like ink. The labor bears no visible fruit. In these seasons, our faith is not being extinguished; it is being tempered. The Lord is letting us learn to trust not the emotion of His presence but the word of His promise.

*“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”* 1 Peter 1:6–7, NKJV

The image of gold in the furnace is one the Fathers have loved. A faith that has never been tried is, so to speak, an untested metal. It may look like gold, but it has not yet proven itself such. The fire is unpleasant. It is also the only thing that will bring forth what is most precious. The servant who has walked through a dry season with the Lord and has not walked away from Him comes back carrying a quality of trust that the easy years could not have produced.

*“Let us not be troubled when we do not feel the sweetness of grace, nor yet when we walk in the darkness of some tribulation. For it is in that very darkness that God is most at work, hollowing out the soul that it may contain more of Him. Faith in such hours is the lamp which, because it burneth in the night, doth truly shine.”* St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies LXXIII

There is one concrete habit, more than any other, that sustains faith in the darkness: the deliberate remembering of what the Lord has done before. Every disciple has a small personal history of His goodness — an answered prayer, a sin forgiven, a door opened, a burden lifted. In dry seasons, we should speak that history aloud, if only to ourselves, and we should do it often. 'The God who did that for me then is the same God now.' That sentence, repeated with conviction, is one of the great disciplines of faith.

### The Faith of the Servant

Everything we have said so far applies to every believer. But there is a particular intensity to the faith required of the servant, because the servant is daily asking other people to trust the Lord, and he cannot ask of others what he has not given himself.

Our Lord Himself marveled at faith in only two places in the Gospels — both of them not in the company of the scribes, but in people outside the religious professionals of the day. A Roman centurion, who had grasped that a word from Christ would be enough, was met with astonishment: 'I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel' (Matthew 8:10). A Canaanite woman who would not be turned away was told, 'O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire' (Matthew 15:28). In both cases, faith was the thing the Lord looked for — and when He found it, the miracle unfolded.

A servant cultivates the faith of the centurion: a deep reverence for the authority of the word of Christ. The centurion understood hierarchy; he knew that when a commander speaks, the thing is done. Our faith in the efficacy of our Lord's word — in Scripture, in sacrament, in absolution, in the small prayer we say over a sick child — is the servant's working capital. When we speak in His Name, we are not offering our own wisdom; we are relaying the word of a Master whose authority the winds and the sea obey.

And a servant cultivates the faith of the Canaanite woman: a tenacity that does not let go. Some of the people we are given to serve will make us wait. Some will seem to resist the work the Lord is doing in them. A servant who gives up at the first refusal has not yet learned the patience of faith. She stayed. She argued sweetly. She received.

*"Jesus said to him, 'If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.' Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, 'Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!'"* Mark 9:23–24, NKJV

It is perhaps the most honest prayer in the Gospels, and it is the prayer of every servant who has been at this work for more than a few years. Faith is not the absence of unbelief; it is the willingness to bring our unbelief to the Lord and ask Him to heal it. That very asking is itself faith.

### Growing in Faith

Faith is a gift, but it is also a muscle. It grows in specific ways, through specific means that the Church has handed down to us. Let us name a few of them, because we will be asked, often, what to do when our faith feels thin — and it helps to have an answer.

First, faith grows by Scripture. 'Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God' (Romans 10:17). A daily portion of the Gospels, read slowly and prayerfully, is the simplest means of strengthening faith that exists. The Lord speaks, and the soul recognizes His voice, and trust is quietly kindled.

Second, faith grows by the Eucharist. There is no stronger catechesis in the bodily reality of our Lord's nearness than the regular receiving of His Body and Blood. A servant who communes attentively — who actually knows what he is doing when he approaches the chalice — will find faith deepening without fanfare, week by week.

Third, faith grows by the testimony of the saints. Hebrews 11 is not only the definition of faith but the medicine for its weakness. When our own faith feels small, we stand in the cloud of witnesses and let their fidelity lend us courage. Reading a life of St. Antony, or St. Mary of Egypt, or a modern confessor, is not a substitute for our own faith, but it often re-kindles it.

Fourth, faith grows by obedient action. We do not wait until we feel perfectly certain before we act; we act on what faith we have, and the Lord meets us in the action. 'If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine' (John 7:17). Faith is often given not in the armchair but on the road — which is to say, in the midst of actually trying to live what we have been taught.

Fifth, faith grows by community. The Lord has placed us in a Body, and the faith of our brothers and sisters holds us up on days when our own is small. When we cannot believe by ourselves, we can stand among those who can, and let their faith carry us for a while. This is one of the oldest meanings of being in the Church: we are saved together.

*“And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.” Hebrews 10:24–25, NKJV*

May the Lord who is Himself the author and finisher of our faith increase it in us day by day. May He give us the trust of the centurion in the power of His word, the tenacity of the Canaanite woman in the face of His silences, and the honesty of the weeping father who could say, 'Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.' And may every servant among us find, at the end of a long life of small trusts renewed morning by morning, that faith has become sight, and that the Person in whom we have been trusting all along is waiting to welcome us home.

### Review Questions

1. Hebrews 11:1 calls faith the 'substance of things hoped for.' In what ways does our own daily life show that we treat the unseen realities of God as more solid than the seen?
2. Christian faith has a Face — the Lord Jesus Christ. How does remembering that faith is trust in a Person (not a set of propositions) change the way we speak about faith with those we serve?

3. 'Faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6) names the living shape of faith. Where in our own week has faith recently 'worked' in concrete acts of love, and where is it asking us to move next?
4. Every servant walks through dry seasons when the felt nearness of the Lord withdraws. What disciplines of remembering His past goodness can help carry us through such seasons without letting go of Him?
5. Our Lord marveled at the faith of the centurion (authority) and the Canaanite woman (tenacity). Which of these two dimensions of faith is the Lord currently growing in us, and how?
6. The weeping father's prayer — 'Lord, I believe; help my unbelief' — may be the most honest prayer in the Gospels. What would it look like to pray it deliberately this week over a specific situation?
7. Name one of the means of growing in faith (Scripture, Eucharist, saints, obedient action, community). What concrete change in our rhythm of life could allow that means to work more fully in us this coming month?

### Books & References

**Scripture:** Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

**Further Reading:**

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Epistle to the Hebrews. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 14.
- St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of John, Books IV–VI.
- St. Isaac the Syrian, The Ascetical Homilies. Translated by the Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston).
- St. Augustine of Hippo, Tractates on the Gospel of John, on John 6 and John 7.
- Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty, Patristic Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews. St. George's Coptic Orthodox Church, Sporting, Alexandria.

*Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning.*

### Lesson Notes