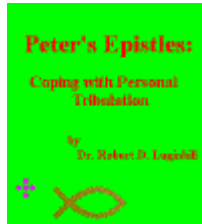


Peter's Epistles #24

Faith Dynamics

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How narrow is the gate and how constrained is the road which leads
to [eternal] life, and few are those who find it!

Matthew 7:14

Translation of 1st Peter 1:8-9:

[. . . at the glorious return of Jesus Christ.] Though you have never laid eyes on Him, yet you love Him. And though you cannot see Him at this present time, yet you have faith in Him. For this reason you rejoice with an inexpressible joy that bespeaks the glorious future to come, when you shall carry off in victory the ultimate prize – the deliverance of your lives – which is the very purpose and objective of this faith of yours.

Introduction: We are about to complete our study of Peter's introductory eulogy, that is, his heartfelt expression of praise to God the Father for His manifold blessings to each of us. As we do so, the issue which commands our attention at the conclusion of verse nine is that of the perseverance of the believer's faith amidst the trials of life. Peter's discussion of the "living hope", the anticipation of the resurrection of our bodies and the ineffable blessings of eternity to come, is set amid a realistic appraisal of life as we know it here and now: in time, the believer's life is one of tribulation. In fact, as believers in Jesus Christ, we are destined to encounter such furious opposition from Satan that the achievement of our final victory – completing life with our faith still intact – is described by Peter in dramatic terms: salvation is a prize "to be won" (Greek *komizo*: to carry off as a prize, get what is due through effort; cf. Peter's use at 1Pet.5:4, and Paul's at 2Cor.5:10; Eph.6:8). This final deliverance is, moreover, the ultimate "objective" of our faith, because in achieving it, we are safe, "saved" in an ultimate, unchangeable way. Until that final victory, however, we are and shall continue to find ourselves in the middle of an intense struggle that concerns our very [eternal] lives.

The Faith Struggle: Great in every way is the reward for our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ despite all satanic opposition to the contrary. We look forward with confidence to a new life, a new body, and all the blessings of the new heavens and the new earth to come. This is our hope! But without our continued *personal faith* in Jesus Christ, this hope would be entirely vain.

The contention, often heard in contemporary evangelical circles, that the preservation and perseverance of personal faith is "automatic" is tragically wrong. The traditional Calvinist position that, to oversimplify, those who fail to persevere in their faith were never genuine believers in the first place is equally misguided. Previously, we had occasion to study in some detail the parable of the sower (see 1st Peter lessons #12-13, 16, 18; Matt.13:1-23; Mk.4:1-20; Lk.8:4-15). In that discussion, it will be remembered, the seed of the Word of God fell on four types of soil: hard-packed, rocky, thorny and good ground. It is the case of the rocky soil that particularly attracts our attention here, for this type represents those who initially *do* express faith, but then fall away under pressure. Such faith does not suffice to save, because the person in question did not "endure until the end" (Matt.24:13); that is, although such individuals once did believe in Christ, at some point this faith dissolved – and they reverted to their unbelieving state.

No other issue of the Christian life should command greater attention from us than this. For without our faith in Christ, we are truly lost, and the proverb comes true, "the end is worse than the beginning" (2Pet.2:20-22). Before examining in detail the question of loss of faith in Christ, we need first to be clear about what it means to trust Christ for salvation.

Becoming a Believer: Everyone comes face to face with the reality and power of God at some point in their lives (Rom.1:18-23; Eccl.3:11). The realization of our individual sinfulness and consequent guilt before this all-powerful God is likewise a universal constant (Rom.2:14-16; Heb.9:27). That is why one of the remarkable things about the free gift of God, salvation through His Son Jesus Christ, is that so many are unwilling to accept it. One would think that if the sure certainty of physical death were not enough motivation to convince of the need for a Savior, at least the hope of deliverance from the hands of a God demanding justice would be:

For if we willfully continue in the life of sin after accepting and recognizing the truth (of the gospel), there remains no further sacrifice we can make for our sins, but only a terrible expectation of judgment, and a burning fire, ready to devour those who oppose (His will).
Hebrews 10:26-27

Included in the promise of the gospel is the good news that we have been freed from our sins by Christ's death on our behalf, and so, by relying on His work instead of our own, will therefore escape the future condemnation of God which is otherwise the destiny of Adam's seed. Thus, the expectation of divine judgment and the blessed relief from this prospect is a legitimate part of any appeal to unbelievers to accept Christ as their savior (cf. Acts 24:15 & 25).

It was certainly this terror of impending judgment in the form of a divinely caused earthquake that so powerfully motivated the Philippian jailor. "Sirs," he anxiously asked Paul and his companions as the temblor bursting open his prison's cells brought home to him the reality of God's power, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul's reply was immediate and unambiguous:

"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."

Acts 16:31

This is the salvation appeal in its most succinct form. You are saved by believing in Christ, pure and simple. You become a Christian by putting your faith in Christ. The Bible makes this clear "at many different times and in many different ways" as the writer of Hebrews reminds us (Heb.1:1). Charles Ryrie, in his Survey of Bible Doctrine, counts over two hundred New Testament passages alone where salvation is said to be dependent upon faith alone. How do you become a believer in Christ, a Christian and a follower of Christ? You simply put your faith in Him, and at that moment you enter the family of God, becoming a part of the body of Christ, His Church. The amount of detailed information a person must have at the point of accepting the Lord is minimal, like a grain of mustard seed, compared to the wonderful body of truth available to him once saved. The issue is simply "Christ": to accept God's gracious offer of eternal life, we must first accept His Son, Christ's person and work:

No one comes to the Father, except through me.

John 14:6

God's Free Gift: Salvation is the free gift of God through Jesus Christ. Eternal life, deliverance from death and condemnation, cannot be purchased for any earthly sum, but it is ours for the taking, completely free of any charge. This is because Jesus Christ has already paid for all of us, by His death on the cross in our place. By His sacrifice, He ransomed us, paying the price for all the sins we would ever commit, and thus opening up the door to paradise. If you have not already done so, the water of life is available to you, free for the drinking right now without any cost. Simply believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved. As ambassadors of Christ, as though God were urging you through us, we beg you, be reconciled to God! (2nd Corinthians 5:20).

Let your heart not be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me.
In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, I would have told you.

I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go and prepare a place for you,
I will come again and take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

John 14:1-3

For God loved the world so much, that he gave His only beloved Son, in order that
whoever believes in Him might not perish, but have eternal life.

John 3:16

For you have been saved by (God's) grace through faith (in Christ);
and this did not come from you – it is God's gift.
Nor did it come from what you have done, lest anyone should boast.

Ephesians 2:8-9

For there is no deliverance through any other person,
nor has any other name on earth been given by which we must be saved.

Acts 4:12

"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."

Acts 16:31

The testimony of scripture is abundantly clear. All that is needed is for you to accept the
gracious offer of a loving God, who has already done everything for you. What more could He
do than to send His precious Son to die in your place, so that you could live forever with Him?
All that is needed is for you to accept, to place your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, to believe in
Him, and eternal life will be yours. All God asks is that you not reject this His ineffable gift.

And the Spirit and the bride say "Come!"
And let the one who hears say, "Come!"
And let the one who is thirsty come;
let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.

Revelation 22:17

Principles of Faith in Christ:

אָמַן 'aman

πιστευω pisteuo

- *Etymology of Faith:* While the Bible uses a broad vocabulary to treat the doctrine of faith, our English concept of "faith" is most commonly rendered by the Hebrew word `aman and the Greek word pisteuo (along with their derivatives). Both verbs are most often translated "believe". For example, in Gen.15:6, where we are told that Abraham "believed in God, and God credited it to him for righteousness", `aman is the word used. The verbal root is related to the idea of being firm and reliable (thus `amunoth are pillars, while `amen, our amen, means "truthfully or reliably so"), so that in the Hebrew, the concept of belief carries with it the idea that the *object* of belief (i.e., God) can be relied upon by those who put their trust in Him. Like a solid pillar, He will support us when we lean on Him, `aman implies (and to this we can all say amen!). The Greek word pisteuo is the one used in the Septuagint (the 3rd century B.C. translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek that greatly influenced New Testament style and vocabulary) for `aman, and so always carries the same connotations of reliance on God. In the Greek, pisteuo means to have faith, or belief in an object. As the negative concept of apistia (faithlessness) makes clear, the "faith" indicated by pisteuo is more than intellectual appreciation of something (cf. Rom.11:20-23 where unbelief is a very willful attitude of heart). Additionally, the participles of pisteuo are used by various New Testament writers where we use the noun "believer(s)". This last fact is significant, because to writers of scripture, believers are people who "have, are, or have come to be in a state of believing". Whichever tense is used, the participle used in lieu of the noun makes crystal clear that believers are people constantly involved in the *action* of belief, whether that action is emphasized as having taken place (Acts 18:27; 19:18; 21:20, 25; Titus 3:8), ever continuing (Eph.1:19), or accomplished once and for all (Heb.4:3).
- *Definition of Faith:* Faith, as we know from the book of Hebrews, is the reality of things not seen: "Faith grounds what we hope for in reality; it is the proof of matters which are invisible" (Heb.11:1; cf. 2Cor.4:18; 5:7). The author of Hebrews goes on to show how faith is one of the quintessential virtues of the Christian life, because by means of faith, famous believers of the past pleased God and witnessed to Him before mankind, acting often in total despite of the values and standards of this world (verses 2-40). They acted in faith, which, according to verse one, gave their hopes a reality, and therefore a conviction, that rendered the opinions of this world valueless by comparison. The writer puts things the opposite of what one usually sees. "Give us a sign!" is the cry of erstwhile believers from our Lord's day up till the present. "Prove to me you're really God!" But the writer of Hebrews tells us that for the truly commendable believers of the past, things worked exactly the reverse of this. They *had faith* that what at present they could only hope for (God's promised rewards) would indeed come to pass; that what at present was *invisible* (the existence and righteousness of God) was nonetheless a reality. This *faith* is then described by the author of Hebrews as the grounds for their hope, as the proof of the invisible. For the rewards they hoped for and the invisible God who will distribute them *do exist*. *By their faith*, the believers described in chapter eleven give

us proof of this. If there were no true rewards, no just and righteous God, then such faith and the mighty acts it has inspired would never exist under the sun. But as it is, the tremendous witness of these courageous believers is abundant proof of the power and reality of God, and of the glorious rewards He has in store for all who persevere in faith. Faith, therefore, encompasses our entire Christianity (Gal.1:23). More than an attitude or action of mind, faith implies reliability (Rom.3:3). It is a profession, a surrender, a yielding, a decision, an act of humility in obedience to and in respect for the authority of God in the fear of God. Only in such total commitment to and reliance upon the integrity of God do we experience the reality of the as yet unseen wonders promised to us.

- *Faith is More than an Intellectual Process:* Faith is more than just an understanding or acknowledgment of God's existence or Christ's divinity. As James says, "Do you really believe in God? That's all very nice. But the demon's believe too and shudder [in anticipation of their coming judgment]" (Jas.2:19). James' point is that faith is not merely an intellectual appreciation of the reality of God or even a mental recognition that Christ is God's only true Son. Faith goes beyond mere cognizance of information. Faith both appreciates and *embraces* these facts. When a person *believes* in the Lord Jesus Christ as the only way to the Father, the only way to escape death and judgment, that person is immediately changed forever, and no mere mental assessment could possibly accomplish a miracle of such proportions. So accompanying our mental perception of the facts of the gospel, our faith must also entail a definite *commitment* to following Christ. This notion is even present in the Greek word *epignosis*. Often used (along with its cognate verb *epigignosko*) to express "knowledge" of God in salvation contexts, *epignosis* includes the idea of *acknowledgment of*, and therefore *obedience to* God's truth and will (Rom.1:28; 1Tim.2:4; 2Tim.2:25).
- *Mechanics of Faith:* The first detailed account of personal salvation in scripture can be found at Genesis 15:6, where we read that Abraham "trusted the Lord, and the Lord reckoned this to him for righteousness". In Old Testament times, believers looked forward to the cross, to the day when God would somehow wipe away sin and open the door of salvation (cf. Rom.3:25b). God has never left Himself without a witness to the mighty deed of deliverance He would render for the world through the sacrifice of His Son. From the coats of skin given to Adam and Eve, through the system of Levitical offerings, up to the actual day of the cross, God has always made it clear to anyone interested in listening that our salvation depends upon the sacrifice of another in our place to pay the penalty for our sins. Abraham trusted in God – not in himself or in his own righteousness – for this ultimate deliverance, and that trust, maintained throughout his life, was the way of salvation for him. In Romans 10:9-10, Paul tells us that the same is true for us today: if we "confess Jesus as Lord with our mouth, and believe in our heart that God raised Him from the dead" we shall be saved. James makes it clear that Paul is not "adding" anything to the mechanics of faith. You can't really be a believer, he points out, without that belief being demonstrated in your life (2:18-26). As evidence, he quotes Abraham's successful passing of that most difficult test of faith, the command from God that he sacrifice his son. Rather than vacillating, Abraham had faith that the God in whom he had trusted would work it all out for good, and the deliverance of Isaac through a substitute provided by God becomes a picture of Christ's sacrifice for us to this very day. If we really do believe God in our heart, it is absolutely impossible that "confessing Jesus as Lord with our

mouth" will not follow, along with any and all manifestations of our faith that God will perform through us in the Christian lives we go on to lead. Apart, then, from the clear picture we have of the saving work of the Person of our Savior, Jesus Christ as we look back on the cross, the way of salvation remains the same for Paul as it was for Abraham: *believe*. And while Abraham could only look forward with hope to the Sacrifice which God would provide on his behalf, *we* have sure and certain knowledge of the work on the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, knowledge for which, as Peter tells us, "the prophets sought and searched" (1Pet.1:10-12). The "confession" part of Romans 10:9-10 is therefore not a prerequisite for becoming a believer, but Paul's way of assuring us (as God did with Abraham, and as James makes clear in his own way) that all true believers can be discerned by their works: i.e. in this case, no one who has really put their faith in Christ would refuse or be unwilling to confess Him as Lord.

- *Content of the Gospel:* Christ is the content of the "good news" (Greek *euangelia*), the fair tidings from God of deliverance from sin and death for all those who believe in His Son, and no other foundation for our faith is possible (1Cor.3:11). Having said this, we need to consider how much information or knowledge about Christ one needs to be saved in the first instance, since it is obvious that all of us who believe learned much more about our Savior *after* we put our faith in Him than we knew *as* we first became believers. Considering the example of Abraham again, our father in the faith did not know all that we now know about the incarnation of Christ, for many of the details of Jesus' taking on of true humanity to die in our stead were veiled from sight until they became historical reality (2Cor.3:12-18). But *since* the cross, Christ Himself, not the principle of God's sacrifice on our behalf (as it was in the Old Testament), is the clear issue in salvation, and therefore the Person and the work of Christ is what must be believed or *acknowledged* (Greek *epignosis*: not mere understanding but rather acceptance) in order to be saved. God the Father has made His Son, Jesus Christ the issue, and there is thus now no other means of deliverance (John 5:23; 12:44; 14:6; Acts 4:12).
- *The Act of Saving Faith:* Believing in Christ is essentially the act of accepting the substitution of Christ's Person and work for our own, that is, recognizing that on our own, we are worthy only of death and condemnation and completely incapable of avoiding the grave. However, once we have heard the good news that God has provided a means of deliverance from this fate common to all mankind, we embrace that "good news" of Jesus Christ and His death on our behalf. Taken from this point of view, therefore, the act of belief is, in essence, making the choice to stand on Christ's righteousness instead of on our own (cf. Gen.15:6; Rom.3:21-26; and cf. Aaron as a picture of Christ "bearing the guilt": Ex.28:38). We put our faith in Him *for* deliverance from sin and death. This last element is a critical one. The good news of the gospel is a proclamation that we have been forgiven on the basis of Christ's work, gaining that forgiveness through faith in the One who procured it. Therefore cognizance on some level of our *need* for forgiveness and deliverance is an important part of saving faith. As our Lord said, "he who has been forgiven little, loves little" (Lk.7:47). Furthermore, unless we truly believe and clearly see that we are in desperate need of deliverance from death and sin, then how can we be properly motivated to accept the gracious offer of God? Thus the *need* and the *opportunity* for salvation are really two sides of the same coin. You believe the necessity of salvation (repentance), so you trust Christ for the reality of salvation (placing faith in Christ).

Thus the two actions described in Romans 10:9-10 of believing and confessing Christ are inextricably intertwined.

- *Faith is the Basic Christian Virtue:* As we have often seen before in our study of 1st Peter, faith is the basic Christian virtue, listed as first (and therefore foundational) in 1st Corinthians 13, and as a basic principle which all Christians should thoroughly understand in Hebrews 6:1 (it is also listed first in Peter's catalogue: 2Pet.1:5). It is impossible to make any progress in the Christian life, or, indeed, to do anything at all in the will and plan of God without faith (Heb.11:6). Faith is the basic virtue, the building-block virtue, upon which all other Christian virtues rest (e.g. *hope*: Heb.11:1; *love*: 1Cor.13).
- *Faith in Christ is the One Way of Salvation:* The Lord Jesus Christ is the center and the focus of our Christian faith and life (Heb.12:2). By His work on the cross, He is the Savior of the whole world (1Jn.2:2; 1Tim.4:10), and no one can approach the Father or gain His forgiveness or approval through any other intermediary (Jn.14:6; Eph.2:18). Christ is the only efficacious object of our faith, that is, the only Person in whom we can legitimately believe and find deliverance from the judgment to come as Peter makes clear at Acts 4:12: *For there is no deliverance through any other person, nor has any other name on earth been designated as essential for our salvation.* The gate is narrow, and the road that leads to it difficult, but there is absolutely no other way to receive eternal life than to accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior (Matt.7:13; Lk.13:24). No matter how difficult a person's life is or how isolated his geography, God has taken everything into account, and the standard since the cross has always been the same: faith in Christ. No amount of good works or sacrifice will ever be sufficient in the Father's eyes to replace the work of His Son on the cross (Eph.2:8-9).
- *Faith is Divisive:* The gospel is free, requires no merit on our part, and is available to all. All God asks is our obedience in accepting the Person and the work of His Son, Jesus Christ. In the perversity of human thinking, this very simplicity and generosity is often a stumbling block. To some, the gospel is "too easy", to others "not nearly intellectual enough" (1Cor.1:23; cf. 2Kng.5:1-14). Others take offense at the notion of divine condemnation of their acts, denying the reality of their sin, hating the light of truth because of their dark deeds (Jn.3:19-21). But we must stand for the truth, no matter what human opinions hold sway in our time: there is no other way to be saved than through faith in Jesus Christ. Such intransigence is often divisive, but so the truth must be. As God divided the world between land and water (Ps.104:9), and as He had Abraham divide the carcasses and pass between them (Gen.15:8-17), as He divided between the light and the darkness (Gen.1:3-4; cf. Jn.1:5), so He divides between the living and the dead, the issue and the dividing point between eternal life and eternal condemnation being faith in His Son. Until the return of our Lord, we can expect the issue of faith in Him, that is, the gospel, to be the sword that divides the human race into two diametrically opposed camps: believers and unbelievers (Matt.10:34; cf. Rom.2:8).
- *Faith is not the End:* For those who believe, the Christian life is only just beginning. After we have taken up our cross in faith, Christ commands us to follow Him (Matt.16:24; Mk.8:34). As we have become members of the family of God by faith, so now we must *walk by*

faith as we strive to follow our Lord throughout the course of our lives (2Cor.5:7). Moreover, Luke adds two other important details to this command of our Lord's to follow Him, on the one hand telling us that this is something that we must do *every day* (Lk.9:23), and, on the other, that without this "following faith", we cannot even be considered His disciples (Lk.14:27). The Greek word for disciple is *mathetes*, a student, from the root of the Greek verb meaning "to learn". Thus, following Christ and learning the truth He has bequeathed us in His holy Word are fundamentally linked and cannot be separated. To follow Christ is to learn His Word, understanding it, believing it, *and* carrying it out (Jas.1:22):

The Christian Life

hearing (by faith)> **THE WORD BELIEVED** <(by works) *doing*

- *Results of Faith:* There are many benefits to being a believer in Christ (In volume III of his systematic theology, Lewis Sperry Chafer lists 33 discrete benefits that accrue to the believers account through divine grace). But surely, one of the most important and appreciated blessings that follow faith is our justification (Rom.5:1). This is because justification (that is, being made righteous in God's eyes because of our reliance on Christ's work through faith) results in our deliverance *from* spiritual death *unto* eternal (Rom.3:21-22; 1Jn.5:11). We who are in Christ through our faith in Him are no longer subject to the fearful and terrible last judgment of God which is the second death (Rom.8:1; Rev.20:11-15), but have "passed over from death into life" (1Jn.3:14).
- *Faith Must be Maintained:* Finally, faith is something we can never afford to take for granted. "Examine yourselves to see whether or not you are in the faith," Paul admonishes the Corinthians (2Cor.13:5). Good advice, especially when we consider the ultimate prize of maintaining our faith: the resurrection and eternal life. We can count on God to be faithful to those who trust in Him (Ps.32:10), but we must also remain faithful to Him (2Tim.2:12-13). This means holding fast to the faith we have professed until the end. After all, it is faith that will ultimately decide the struggle:

For this is the victory that has overcome the world : our faith!

1st John 5:4

Conclusion: No matter how difficult the life that has fallen to our lot, no matter how steep the road or straight the gate, our perseverance in faith in Jesus Christ is not vain (1Cor.15:58; Gal.6:8). For on the other side of that gate lies eternity, with blessing and comfort beyond our mortal capacity to comprehend:

For in yet a little while – how short, how short [a time]! – He who is coming shall [indeed] come, and will not delay. And My righteous one will live by (i.e., on account of) his faith – and if he shrinks back, My heart will take no pleasure in him."

Hebrews 10:38

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