OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

James 2: A Snapshot of Faith

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While it is an important issue, we should be careful not to become so focused on understanding James 2 in light of the Pauline texts that emphasize similar themes that we miss what James shows about the nature of genuine faith. As we explore this, we will think first about the word *faith* in NT use and then review the components of genuine faith as seen in James 2.14–26.

Faith in Popular Thought and the NT

The noun πίστις (*pistis*) (243) and cognate verb πιστεύω (*pisteuō*) (241) appear 484 times in the NT; 19 are in James (among his 1,748 words). Faith is necessary for a relationship with God, as Hebrews 11.6 affirms: "And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." Thus, faith is "ultimately the essence of the Christian religion itself" (Barth 1993, 92).

But what do we mean by *faith*? Many associate the term with irrationality, lack of evidence, and/or wishful thinking. These descriptions, taken from a collection of quotations I have compiled over the years, illustrate:

- Betrand Russell: "We may define *faith* as a firm belief in something for which there is no evidence. When there is evidence, no one speaks of *faith*" (Peter 1977, 178).

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- H. L. Menken: "Faith—an illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable" (Peter 1977, 179).
- Ambrose Bierce: "Faith, n. Belief without evidence in what is told by one who speaks, without knowledge, of things without parallel" (Peter 1977, 179).
- Richard Robinson: "Christian faith … Its essence is the determination to believe that there is a god no matter what the evidence on the question may be" (Robinson 1976, 121)
- Walter Kaufmann: "Belief in the narrow sense, in which it is contrasted with knowledge, is distinguished by the lack of evidence sufficient to compel the assent of every reasonable person.… Faith is belief—usually belief in the narrow sense—that is held intensely, with some emotional involvement…" (Kaufmann 1978, 113)

More positive are these statements:

- William Barclay: "To the writer to the Hebrews faith is a hope that is absolutely certain that what it believes is true, and what it expects will come" (Barclay 1976, 128).
- Neil Lightfoot: "Faith is the full assurance and inner conviction that gives men the power to stake their lives on unseen realities (Lightfoot 1976, 205–206).

Ceslas Spicq writes, "*Pistis,* which derives from *peithomai* [πείθομαι] ('be persuaded, have confidence, obey'), connotes persuasion, conviction, and commitment, and always implies confidence." In the papyri, it was typically used as a legal term and "its predominant meaning is 'guarantee, security.'" It entailed the ideas of respecting a commitment and fulfilling an obligation and was also used to describe complete loyalty and fidelity (Spicq 1994, 110–111, 112–114, 116).

Hebrews 11.1 comes closest to a dictionary-like definition of the word. As translated in the 1984 NIV, the verse says, "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."[1] *Being sure of* translates ὑπόστασις (*hypostasis*) which refers to (1) the essential nature or actual being of something with (2) a secondary meaning involving the ideas of a guarantee or title deed that bore evidence of ownership (Bauer 2000, 1040–1041). From their study of the papyri, Moulton and Milligan concluded that *hypostasis* refers to that which "underlies visible conditions and guarantees a future possession." They proposed that Hebrews 11.1 be translated, "Faith is the *title deed* of things hoped for" (Moulton and Milligan 1972, 660). Spicq concurs: "Thus faith is the true title attesting to one's ownership of the heavenly property that one hopes for, and thus the guarantee that one will obtain them in the future" (Spicq 1994, 112).

[1] The 2011 NIV translates, "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." Cf. ESV which reads, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

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Certain translates ἔλεγχος (*elengchos*) which referred to presenting evidence to prove something and the kind of evidence a lawyer would take into court (Bauer 2000, 315). As Paul shows, this is not a certainty that derives from sight (or any of the other empirical senses) but is knowledge attained through testimony (2 Cor 5.7; Rom 10.17). While we readily agree with those who point out that we can be fooled by false testimony, we would note that we can also be fooled by our senses. But, as with sense data, we can also verify testimony (cf. John 20.30–31; 1 John 1.1–3). Thus, biblically, faith is never presented as something possessed in the absence of evidence or sustained in spite of the evidence. Instead, it is always recommended based on evidence.

Three Characteristics of Faith

James 2.14–26 assumes the evidentiary nature of faith, but also shows that genuine faith includes other components.

First, faith begins with *knowledge* of God. As in Hebrews 11.6, James assumes the foundational premise that faith begins with acknowledging God's existence. He commends the confession that "God is one" (v. 19). He says that "Abraham believed God" (v. 23). He also commends Abraham for offering his son Isaac on the altar (v. 21). His references in these statements to events ranging from Genesis 15 to 22 remind us that throughout the Genesis account, Abraham was given evidence that God could be trusted and built on his confidence to continue growing in his knowledge of God, even when called upon to do something unexpected or with an unknown outcome. His knowledge was the premise for the other characteristics of his faith.

Second, faith *trusts* God because we know him. Abraham offered Isaac on the altar (cf. Jas 2.21) because of his accumulated knowledge about God from which he concluded that he could trust him implicitly. The Hebrews writer elaborates on the connection:

> By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back (Heb 11.17–19).

The trust aspect of faith is assumed in the entirety of James's encouragement to his readers. It's evident in 1.3 when he assures them that the testing of faith through trials will produce steadfastness, and again in 1.5–6 when he says that when they lacked wisdom, they should ask God for it, trusting that he would supply what they needed. Similarly, in the letter's last chapter, the element of trust is assumed in his assurance that those who were oppressed could count on relief at the coming of the Lord (5.7–11), as well as in his confidence that "the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up" (5.15).

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Third, faith is *active* for God. James recalled and emphasized that both Abraham and Rahab went beyond their profession of belief and trust in God to take action (2.21–25). As with trust, James assumes this characteristic of faith elsewhere in the letter. People of faith were to "count it all joy" when facing trials (1.2–3) and, without wavering, seek wisdom for dealing with those trials (1.5–7). They were to be "doers of the word," a life direction that included proactive care for orphans and widows (1.22, 27). They were to control their tongues, live morally, and resist the temptation to show partiality because such behavior was not in line with belief in the Lord of glory (1.26–2.7).

Another Example

Knowledge, trust, and action: James 2.14–26 is not the only place in Scripture we see these characteristics of genuine faith on display. It is of particular interest to read Paul's brief summary of his life of service as stated in 2 Timothy 1.12: "That is why *I am suffering* [action] as I am. Yet this is no cause for shame, because *I know whom I have believed* [knowledge], and *am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted* [trust] to him until that day" (NIV).

The examples of James, Paul, and others belie the notion that the mere acceptance of certain teachings constitutes the sum total of authentic faith. As Dan McCartney has written, "In a day when people often confuse justification by faith with justification by *profession* of faith, we do well to hear James's concern" (McCartney 2009, 279).

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