

Faith in the Old Testament

INTRODUCTION

Faith is something we associate with the New Testament. It is used most commonly as a word which explains the nature of our relationship with God. For this reason we talk about Christian 'Faith'. Classically, however, faith is NOT simply a description of how we respond to God. Faith is the human response to God's prompting. Faith happens because God has reached out to us first, classically, 'while we were yet sinners', and what God wants is our response of faith.

Faith is not just 'belief'. It has many features. We can explore this by asking the question 'what do I mean by saying that I have faith in Jesus Christ?' Answers will go beyond mere assent and belief to love, trust etc. and are nearly always to do with our 'relationship' with Him.

However, the best way to explore what faith in God and His son Jesus Christ means, is to look at the Old Testament, and what it has to say about our relationship with God. This is found in what the Old Testament calls 'Covenant'. A Covenant is a relationship which has benefits for both parties. In this case, the benefit God wants is that we should love Him, and the benefit we obtain is that of being re-united with our Maker. The only question is, do we want what God offers us?

THE PROLOGUE

In Genesis 3, the Bible describes how a separation has been created between God and ourselves, and it is all down to the presence of evil in the world, and the ability God has given every man and woman to choose. All of us can choose evil or choose good, but history shows that despite the evidence for the benefits of 'good', people have a propensity to choose 'evil'.

God therefore sought to draw His people back to Himself by means of establishing a covenant with them. The Old Testament is the story of that covenant.

STAGE 1 – SECURITY WITH GOD - THE COVENANT WITH NOAH

See Genesis 9:8-17

The first covenant is a unilateral covenant which God makes with Noah and all His descendants (that is, us) that He will not destroy us because of our rebellion and sin against Him. It covers all Creation.

FAITH is always dependent upon the prior love of God, shown towards us. When we recognise that God has first loved us, then we can begin a response of faith to Him. Paul explains that faith is 'not of our own doing' in Ephesians (2:8)

STAGE 2 – RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD - THE COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

See Genesis 12:1-3, 13:14-18, 15:1-6, 17:1-8

The passage shows how God begins by promising Abraham that He will make him a great nation and bless him, and make him a blessing to others (12:2,3). He then adds the promise of land for the nation (13:14-18), but, crucially, responds positively when Abraham, of his own volition, chooses to believe God (15:6) 'and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness'. A formal covenant binding these things together is then made in Genesis 17.

FAITH as in the case of Abraham, is our chosen response to God's love and graciousness. And by that faith, we are 'put right' with God. (See also Romans 1:16,17)

STAGE 3 – LIVING BY GOD’S LAWS - THE COVENANT WITH MOSES

See Exodus 19:1-5, 20, 24:7,8, 34. See also Leviticus 19:18 and Deuteronomy 6:4,5

The people of Israel were liberated from Egypt in the midst of signs and wonders, in order to go and worship their God at Mount Sinai. When they arrived there, God gave them the laws which would govern them as a people (19:1-5). These laws is found from Exodus 20, the Ten Commandments, onwards. After the people of Israel sinned by building a golden calf, Moses had to obtain the commandments again (Ex 34). There are important parts of the ‘Law’ in Leviticus, notably the ‘Moral Codes’ of Leviticus 19.

Note that God gave Moses many laws for the people of Israel, many of which are superseded now by the work of Jesus Christ on the Cross. However, Jesus Himself pointed to the two most important summaries of the Law (Matt 22:36-40, Mark 12:28-31) which are found in Leviticus 19:18 and Deuteronomy 6:4,5

The law was given as a moral and culturally practical guide for how God’s people should live as a nation. Although it does not seem like it to us now, most of its provisions (such as the famous ‘Lex Talionis’ – ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’ Ex 21:24) were far more ‘kindly’ in their own day than the common practice of other nations. God’s Covenant people had to live together as a nation amongst other nations and in a disciplined way. Otherwise they would forget the God who chose them.

FAITH has never been a private matter, we live as a community of people who believe – the church. A community needs to have a discipline, and that discipline is provided by ‘rules’ by which we live. We have many different churches with different rules, but Jesus prayed with fervour on the night before He died that all His followers might ‘be one as we are one’ (John 17:11). We cannot escape this call from Jesus for unity amongst God’s people!

Also, faith has always been a matter of obedience to God, and His will is expressed through His ‘laws’ such as the Ten Commandments’ etc. Although many of the details of the sacrificial system of the law have been done away with by the work of Jesus on the Cross (as explained in the letter to the Hebrews), Jesus insisted that He had come to ‘fulfil the Law and the Prophets’ (Matt 5:17).

STAGE 4 – LIVING IN THE WORLD – THE COVENANT WITH JOSHUA AND THE PEOPLE

See Joshua 24:19-28

When the people had done what God had commanded of the them and taken possession of the land of Israel, they were required to ‘re-make’ their covenant with God. They had to publicly declare their allegiance to God in front of each other, and promise to keep God’s laws.

FAITH is something which has to be openly declared in front of others. Giving testimony is regarded as an essential part of adult baptism or confirmation of baptismal vows.

STAGE 5 – LED AS GOD’S PEOPLE - THE COVENANT WITH DAVID

See 2 Samuel 7, especially verses 11-13. Also 2 Sam 7:21, 1 Kings 8:23,39,

God’s people, despite having laws, needed a leader. The experience of being led by ‘judges’ was not helpful (see the main theme of the book of Judges – 17:6, 21:25). God chose first Saul as a leader, making it clear that a leader of God’s people should not try to take the place of God in the eyes of the people (1 Samuel 8). Saul did just this (1 Samuel 15:17-35).

Using Samuel the prophet again, God chose David as leader instead of Saul. He had to endure decades of personal trial, exile and strife, before Saul died and He could become King (1 Samuel 20 to 2 Samuel 5). David was recognised by others as a man who was blessed by God, and the Lord made promises to David which are like a covenant (see 2 Samuel 7) in which He promises that a leader like David will always lead the people of God, and do His will. In retrospect, this promise is the beginning of what we now call the ‘Messianic hope’ of a leader ‘of David’s line’ who will save His people.

FAITH Christian people have faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah, God’s chosen, as their only leader. All other leadership within the church takes its cue from Him.

Note that Leadership amongst God's people was sometimes expressed by priests, kings or prophets, and often a combination of these. Indeed, Jesus has been called our 'prophet, priest and king'. This has something to teach us about leadership in the church today.

STAGE 6 – WORSHIPPING THE LORD – THE COVENANT WITH SOLOMON

See 2 Chronicles 6:11, 13f. 14, also 2 Chron. 7:12-18

When Solomon built the Temple, He did so in order to provide a permanent place for God's people to worship Him, and a place where God could be said to 'live', His prayers of blessing in the Temple talk about the covenant relationship of God and His people as expressed through worship. This was based around the sacrificial system of the Temple, but also included elements which are familiar to us today:

- Praise and thanksgiving
- Confession and repentance
- Intercession and petition

FAITH The covenant of worship which Solomon speaks of reminds us that worship is essential to faith. Faith can hardly be said to exist unless we worship the Lord in whom we have faith. Worship is a highly contentious issue today, but at its heart, **worship is the emptying of ourselves before God, so that He may fill us up with His Spirit.** This was uniquely recognised by Solomon in his great prayer (2 Chron. 6 and 7)

STAGE 7 – A RELATIONSHIP OF THE HEART - THE COVENANT AND THE PROPHETS

See Isaiah 24:5, 42:6, 49:6-8, 54:10, 55:3, 59:21-60:1

See Jeremiah 11:2f. 31:31-33, 32:40,

See Ezekiel 16:8, 59-62, 34:25, 37:26

See Malachi 2:4, 5,8,10,14, 3:1

See Joel 2:26 – 3:1

The fact remains that the people of Israel failed in their task of being a 'light to the nations' (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6), and the great nations of Judah (capital Jerusalem) and Israel (capital Samaria) were eventually overrun (see timescale chart). The Northern Kingdom of Israel was overrun and obliterated by the Assyrians as prophesied by Amos, Hosea and Isaiah in 721 BC. The Southern Kingdom of Judah was overrun by the Babylonians in 597 – 587 BC and the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed.

This was catastrophic for the people, Israelite or Judean. With the Temple destroyed and the people scattered all over the world, **God sent prophets who reinterpreted the faith of the people, in terms of a NEW COVENANT**, as in all the quotes above. This is a major theme of the three major prophets, but in particular Jeremiah, who personally endured the siege of Jerusalem.

FAITH It is the renewed faith of Israel as interpreted by the prophets which Jesus picks up on time and time again in His ministry (see Matt 3:3, 4:14, 8:17, 12:17, 13:14 etc.), and uses the prophets to explain His own ministry. It was Jesus who finally brought the 'NEW COVENANT' of faith of which the prophets had spoken.

Jeremiah, who spoke so fervently about a NEW COVENANT of the heart is the inspiration for the letter to the Hebrews (Hebrews 8:10, 10:16) and its explanation of Christian faith.

Also, the prophecies of Joel about a renewed covenant lie at the heart of our understanding of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2:17f.)

Faith, in the end is our New Covenant with the Lord our God. It is our route to being made right with God and having peace with Him (Romans 5:1f.)