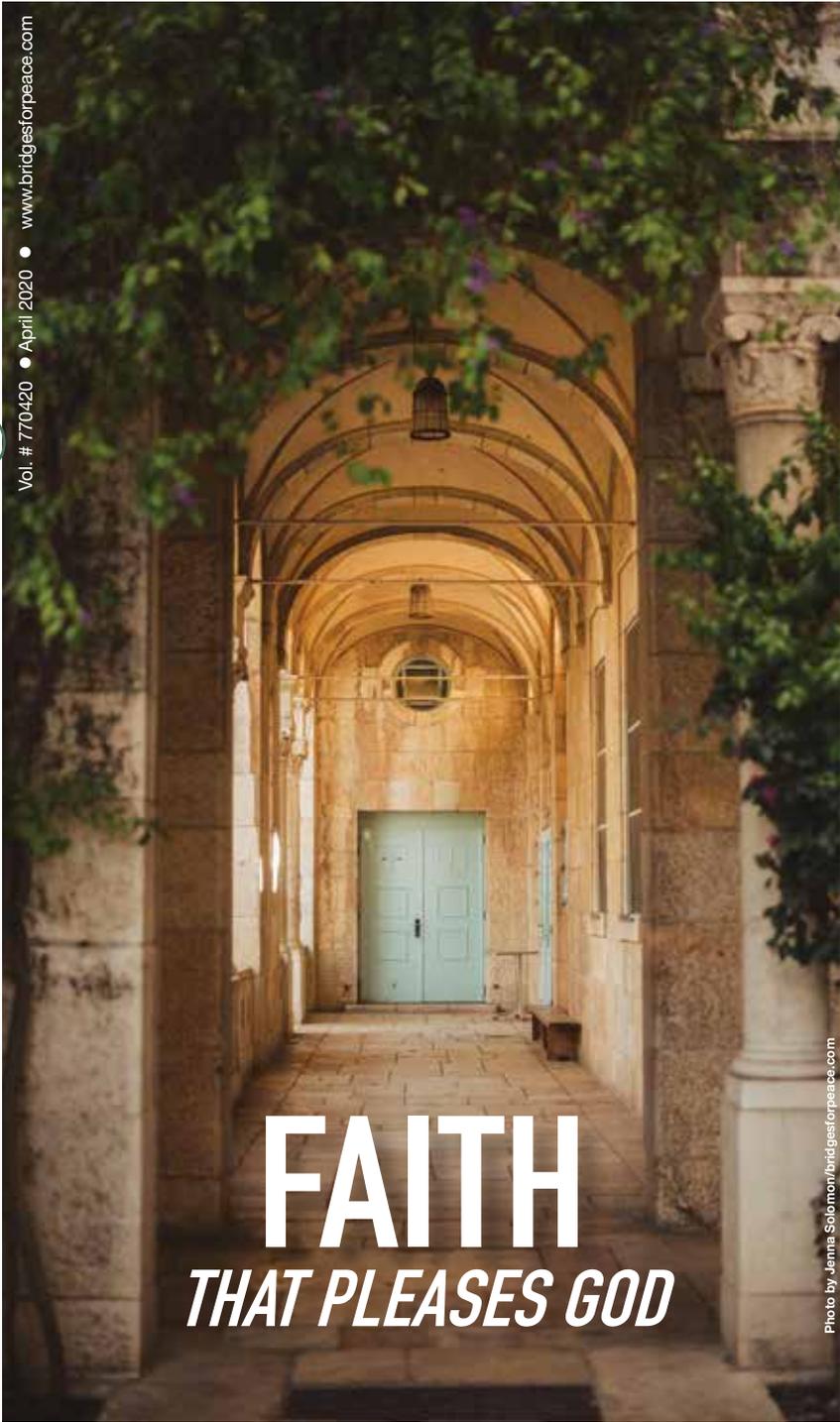


ISRAEL Teaching Letter

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FAITH *THAT PLEASES GOD*

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SOMETIMES AS CHRISTIANS we forget that we have our own vocabulary, using terminology that can leave our non-Christian friends scratching their heads and wondering what we are talking about. Recently, I have come to realize that they are not the only ones who are sometimes confused by our jargon. There are many words in our Christian vocabulary that are actually commonly misunderstood by believers as well.

One of those words is faith. Although the word appears in the Bible up to 521 times, depending on your translation, it is a word that has been steeped in controversy throughout the ages. The writer of Hebrews tells us that without it, it is impossible to please God, so it would seem that a correct understanding of the concept is pretty important. That, however, has not kept the storm from raging through the centuries over its true meaning. Thank the Lord that the writers of the Bible worked very hard to give us a description of what real biblical faith should look like.

TWO WORDS, ONE CONTROVERSY

The Greek word that is almost exclusively translated “faith” in the Writings of the Apostles (NT) is *pistis*. Although it, like most words, has several layers of meaning, they all relate to the common concept of belief. *Pistis* refers primarily to what you think, what you believe to be true, what is in your head and hopefully in your heart. In Hebrew, however, the word for faith is *emunah*, perhaps better rendered “faithfulness.” It is much more of an action word and could be translated as “belief made evident by action.”

The controversy in the Church has continued through the ages. Is faith about belief, or are we justified by our works? Some accused the apostle James of claiming that we are saved by our works, therefore entrapping the Church in legalism. Others pointed to Paul, who, they claimed, taught that works have no impact on our standing with God and that we are saved by grace alone, leading to the accusation of hedonism.

Perhaps some of the misunderstanding stemmed from the audiences to which these two great men of God were speaking. James is clear that he is writing to Jewish believers in Jesus (Yeshua) who are living outside of the nation of Israel. These



first-century Jews would have grown up with the *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.), fully grasping concepts such as monotheism, purity, righteousness and faithfulness *of* and *to* God. Paul on the other hand is writing to congregations consisting primarily of people recently saved from paganism. These new believers were still grappling with the effects of paganism on their lives and their thinking. They would have been polytheists, perhaps having believed in child sacrifice or temple prostitution. Many would have spent most of their lives working very hard to purchase redemption from a myriad of gods, thus ensuring safety and prosperity for their families. These widely divergent worldviews would have necessitated James and Paul using very different language to tell the same story.

Though Paul was very clear that we are justified (made right) by faith (*pistis*), he also spoke often of our ensuing adoption as sons, being indwelt by God’s Spirit (Gal. 4:6). Such was our pathway to a changed life, a new way of living, acting and behaving (2 Cor. 5:17). Paul clearly makes his point in Ephesians 2:8–10: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, **created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them**”* (emphasis added).

James had a similar expectation. In the second chapter of his book, he makes the famous statement, “...*faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead*” (James 2:17). In 2:14, he queries: “*What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith [pistis] but does not have [accompanying] works? Can faith save him?*” Is it real, authentic belief, he asks, if it has no outward expression? Throughout his book, he makes it clear that *pistis* is only half the story. In the final analysis, James and Paul agree that vibrant, animated faith—the kind spoken of by the writer of Hebrews—is a marriage of *pistis* and *emunah*. Here, the spark of belief is ignited by the Holy Spirit, continually prompting the believer to acts of righteousness, the outward working of an inward reality and a life of joyful obedience. Such is faith that pleases God.

A BIT MORE CONFUSION

As I did research in preparation for this teaching letter, I encountered what I will call the “faith coin.” On one side, we have the previously discussed faith that pleases God. On the other side, however, we have faith that endures. I believe together, they give us a full and beautiful picture of biblical faith. But what is faith that endures?

The book of Revelation is filled with references to those who persevere, who overcome, whose faith is victorious and who have faith that endures. One can almost picture these believers at times hanging on by their fingernails but persevering nonetheless. Such faith will be rewarded, the Bible tells us, with a myriad of blessings. What could shake such faith? Perhaps our own understanding of the word “doubt” is the greatest enemy that such committed faith encounters.



The dictionary defines doubt as a feeling of uncertainty, a lack of conviction, calling into question the truth of something, as distrust or the inclination not to believe or accept. It is another of those words so important in our Christian vocabulary. Throughout the Bible, it appears nearly 200 times in its various forms. We read it and are sobered by it often. But do we really understand it? Do each of those 200 words translated “doubt” have the same meaning? What is the Bible actually saying to us about this critical concept?

IN THE BEGINNING . . .

To lay a solid foundation for our discussion, we must go all the way back to the Garden of Eden and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Jewish sages throughout the generations have often referred to it as the Tree of Doubt because that is where humankind’s struggle with doubt began.

The Garden of Eden would have been incomprehensible in its beauty and peace. Adam and Eve were people of unadulterated purity, as was the world in which they lived. Such a stress-free environment is beyond our ability to imagine. That all changed, however, when Adam took a bite out of that infamous apple.

We know that evil existed in the Garden because the serpent



slithered about and was eventually successful in enticing Eve to sin. But until that moment, evil was external, almost irrelevant in their lives. Once Adam gave in to temptation, however, that evil became internalized—a part of himself and a part of the now-tainted world in which he lived. In the telling of the story in Genesis, we hear the serpent’s words, “*You will not surely die,*” (Gen. 3:4), planting the first seed of doubt in mankind. “*You will be like God, **knowing** good and evil,*” (v. 5, emphasis added) the snake proclaimed, and the Bible tells us that they did indeed *know* that they were naked. In both instances, the word in Hebrew is *yada*. It indicates a kind of knowing that goes beyond mere intellectual comprehension. It is the word used in the *Tanakh* (OT) to describe sexual intimacy and indicates a deep and profound experience. How shocked Adam must have been when a seemingly innocent nibble resulted in a life-shattering internal encounter with an evil he had never before known existed. At that moment, the human mind was changed for all time, doubt becoming mankind’s forever companion.

Today, experts tell us that our brains are hardwired to doubt and prone to a certain degree of skepticism. On the one hand, such a tendency can be protective, keeping us from bad decisions or impulsiveness. However, it can also keep us from believing the truth and can be the instrument for shipwrecking that biblical faith we so desire.

Unfortunately, Christianity has taught that certainty is another definition of faith. There should be no questions, doubts, issues or problems allowed, and anything less than 100% certainty is negative at best and heresy at worst. From the outside, our faith is sometimes criticized as promoting a “blind faith,” one without reason or objectivity. In such an environment, there is no mechanism for examining our assumptions and beliefs or dealing honestly with our struggles. If such rigidity exists, it can leave people with a faith that is “brittle and easily broken.”

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

In Matthew 21:21 and Mark 11:23, the Greek word translated as “doubt” actually means “to back up from.” In Matthew 14:31 and Romans 4:20, it means to waver, much like a leaf in the breeze. In Luke 24:38, it refers to an argument, discussion or human reasoning. In Mark 9:24, the Greek word means a moment of weakness. Clearly, the use of the word “doubt” in our Bibles seldom indicates unbelief, even though that is how we most often read it.



Because we see faith as certainty, we most often equate doubt with unbelief, but they are definitely not the same. Actually, unbelief is the condition of the unbeliever, a result of resistance to God. Even though the Lord may beckon, “*Come now, and let us reason [argue] together*” (Isa. 1:18a), the unbeliever remains just that, not doubting but unbelieving. Doubt, then, is the condition of the believer—because you must have faith in order to doubt. Doubt as defined in the Bible is not the opposite of faith, but rather an element of it. It is our mechanism for examining our beliefs and assumptions, dealing with our questions, grappling with our weaknesses. It is the means by which our spiritual muscles are exercised and strengthened, and our faith deepened.

As we have examined our “faith coin,” a picture of biblical faith has emerged. In it, we see *pistis* (belief) as our foundation, the first step that begins our journey. It quickly gives birth to *emunah*, the impetus for righteous action and joyful obedience to the commands and instructions of the Lord. It recognizes that faith is not the absence of doubt, but the ability to recognize our struggles. It is a trust in God that allows us to voice our questions and grapple with our wavering while choosing righteous action, even in the midst of uncertainty. It is the choice to go with God even when we are unsure of our destination and to trust that regardless of our fears or doubts, God holds us firmly, safely and permanently in the palm of His hand.

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Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

TERMINOLOGY:

Many of our readers are seasoned supporters of Israel while others are just beginning to understand the importance of standing with God's chosen nation; some prefer the use of Hebrew names and terms, while others are comfortable with more traditional Christian terminology. Because we want to show respect to all of our readers while providing an enjoyable educational experience, we are making every effort to use both terms whenever possible. The following are some of the most common examples:

- Jesus (Yeshua)
- *Tanakh* (Old Testament or OT) – *Tanakh* is an acronym used in Judaism which stands for *Torah*, *Neviim* or Prophets and *Ketuvim* or Writings.
- Writings of the Apostles (New Testament or NT)
- *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.)

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