



COMMENDED THROUGH FAITH Hebrews 10:19–12:2 in Theological Context¹

Since, as believers, we each have personal pressures, as does the church at large, it is fitting that we encourage each other in the life of faith to which we have been divinely called. Faith, though, is a rich theme in Scripture and requires us to distinguish the sort of faith in view in the epistle to the Hebrews. Note several options.

General faith. NonChristians regularly speak of faith, but may refer to no more than opinion. When getting on a flight, I, like all the other travelers, believe the pilot can get us to the right destination. We believe this while knowing nothing of his mental state or training. Such an opinion, amounting to an uninformed assumption, is a sort of faith. On other occasions, general faith is informed, by perception, experience, and logical deduction. As such, it is purely an act of the intellect. At other times, it is based on testimony. This is how interviews are decided and friendships and marriages are formed. General faith, though, is not the notion in view in the epistle to the Hebrews.

Historical faith. Our entire race utilizes general faith, yet only some trust the Bible, despite the evidence in support of it. Many of those who possess an intellectual agreement with the Bible nevertheless fall far short of a relationship with God. The former is foundational to the latter, but the latter cannot be reduced to the former. We need a knowledge of the gospel for fellowship with God, yet there is more to being a Christian than merely identifying and concurring with its propositions. In the epistle to the Hebrews the author assumes knowledge of God and trust in the record of his involvement in history (beginning with 1:1), but he is concerned that his readers have a richer faith, one possible only through an encounter with God.

Temporal faith. A person, possessing historical faith, may begin to feel in his or her conscience and emotions the force of those biblical truths trusted intellectually. Yet, where faith is temporal, the emotive impact of

truth passes. Recall from Jesus' parable of the sower the seed which vanished as quickly as it sprung up (Matt. 13:5, 20-21). The faith in view was, says Louis Berkhof, "imaginary."² Temporal faith is a delusion, rooted not in a regenerate (i.e., new born) heart, but in enjoyment. This becomes apparent under trial or persecution. That is why the author of Hebrews exhorts his readers to ensure that their faith is saving (Heb. 6:1-6).

Saving faith. Unlike general, historical, and temporal faith, saving faith requires regeneration for its existence. Without God's gift of the new birth, we have neither the power nor the desire to believe in Christ for our salvation. This is why the Reformed teach that new birth precedes faith.

Saving faith possesses three elements. (i) Knowledge (*notitia*). This intellectual element is the equivalent of historical faith. It entails an acceptance of the truths of Scripture, most relevantly the depravity of man and the redeeming work of Christ. (ii) Assent (*assensus*). This emotional element takes us beyond historical faith and infers the Spirit's use of our knowledge of the gospel to instil in us a sorrow for sin and a longing for forgiveness. Such emotions are rooted not in the flesh, as in temporal or imaginary faith. Instead, they constitute "a hearty trust" (Heidelberg Catechism [1563], A. 21). (iii) Trust (*fiducia*). This volitional element is climactic, for it speaks of our collapsing on Jesus, gratefully receiving him as our Savior and Lord. We are the ones who fully and freely collapse on Jesus, yet our doing so results from the Spirit's conviction of our sins and his impressing on us the hope of forgiveness in Jesus. The Bible depicts this trust as a looking to Jesus (Jn. 3:14-15; cf., Num. 21:9)[a hungering, thirsting, eating, and drinking (Matt. 5:6; Jn. 6:50-58; 4:14); and a coming and receiving (1:12; Jn. 5:40; 6:44, 65; 7:37-38). Each depiction pertains to what we call the *actus* (act) of saving faith.

This act completes our conversion, for God has promised to graciously forgive all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Empowered by our new birth, our saving faith is accompanied by repentance. These two expressions of conversion are distinct but inseparable. As Scottish theologian John Murray put it so beautifully (see his paperback

¹ Originally, this piece introduced a sermon series on Hebrews 10:19–12:2 preached at St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, August 8–October 10, 2021.

² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, reprint edition from the 1958 British edition (Edinburgh and Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 502.



Redemption: Accomplished and his *Collected Writings* [chapter on faith]), our faith is penitent and our repentance is believing. In other words, we come to Christ out of sorrow for our sins. In coming, we commit to forsake them. After all, Christ has died on account of them.

The epistle to the Hebrews reminds us, however, that saving faith needs to be attested. The Christian readers had begun well, serving Christ and even suffering for his sake (10:32-34), but, by the time of the letter, those were “the former days.” They had now so spiritually declined that the author—we cannot know for sure who he was—deems them to be in trouble (2:1; 3:12-13; 5:11-6:1; 13:7). In their weakness, they may even apostasize the faith, attracted by the externals of Jewish belief and practice in their local community (likely in Italy, 13:24).

Thus, the writer challenges his readers whether, in effect, their faith is saving or just temporal or imaginary (e.g., Heb. 6:1-6; 10:26-31, 35-40). How humbling! But we are humbled, too, when confronted with the question, “Are you *really* a Christian?” At the age of fifteen, my father posed such a question to me. I was glad he did, for by that time I had come to realize that my profession of faith was spurious. In fact, I was looking to be free of it so that I could seek the Lord afresh. Several months later, on August 14, 1981, I came to saving faith in Jesus Christ and testify to you that there is no comparison between temporal and saving faith.

But how can we spot the difference? The author of Hebrews gives us some pointers. He says that the *actus* of saving faith always leads into the *habitus* (habit) or life of faith. Quoting the prophet Habakkuk (2:3-4), the author of Hebrews tells his readers that the righteous live by faith (10:38). In other words, those who through saving faith have had the righteousness of Christ imputed or reckoned to them, go on to pursue a righteous life. They do so not *for* their salvation, but *from* their salvation.

To serve the restoration of his readers, the writer sets about awakening them from their slumbers. Negatively, he warns them of what happens to those who apostasize from Christ. Since it is impossible to restore them they await the judgment of God (6:4; 10:26-31). Positively, he proceeds in chapter 11 to inspire them through one account after another of what Old

Testament saints endured in order to “preserve their souls” (10:40). This inspiration culminates with Christ. Although he had no need of saving faith, for our salvation he “endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (12:2). Thus, no one truly saved takes lightly the call to endure. Our endurance is energized by “so great a cloud of witnesses” (12:1), the chiefest of whom is our Lord Jesus.

Miraculous faith. The believer’s hall of fame reminds us that within the life of faith God, on occasion, grants us a strong belief that he will work a miracle for us. Miracles perforate natural sequences or succeed reasonable expectations, producing an outcome that could only be explained by God. Sometimes miracles occur through the *active* beseeching of God, that he will not put us to shame. On other occasions, they occur through our *passive* receipt of those we did not seek, but which God graciously and powerfully provided.

While saving faith is not required for receipt of a miracle, and although miracles may occur without resulting in saving faith in the heart of the person experiencing one—after all, God is not hindered from working in and through the unsaved to fulfill his purposes for his church and his world—we should not be surprised that miracles feature in the life of faith. Enoch was taken up into the presence of God without dying, Sarah “received power to conceive,” Joseph foresaw the Exodus that would occur after his days, the Hebrews crossed the Red Sea, the walls of Jericho fell down at the command of God, the mouths of lions were stopped, and the dead were raised (11:5, 11-12, 22 [cf., Gen. 50:24; Ex. 1:8], 29, 30, 33, and 35). Such miracles were not a bucket list of personal wishes. God used them to save his people and to strengthen their endurance.

This salvation has now come through Christ, yet God still works miracles. Although apostolic signs were already fading out before the completion of the New Testament canon (2:3-4), God continues to work occasional miracles to sustain his church until the end of the age and, meanwhile, to strengthen the faith of his people amid. While, then, we affirm the saying, “Once saved, always saved,” we refuse in doing so to cease enduring for God’s glory and for the preservation of our souls. Rather, we aim, says the author of Hebrews, to be commended through faith (11:2, 39). May God help us to do so, and for the display of his glory in this world and the next.