

What is the Power of Faith?

August 17, 2025

Jeremiah 23:23-29

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

“Now faith,” wrote the author of Hebrews at the beginning of chapter eleven, “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

In some ways that’s a definition oriented toward the modern and post-modern ages of skepticism about religion, when the question of the existence of God is one that gets asked regularly. In the first century, however, that was not the burning religious question. The existence of not just the Hebrew God but of divine beings in general was mostly assumed. Most people of Rome, Greece, Egypt, and the surrounding nations simply accepted the reality of a multitude of gods, some of greater power, some of lesser, that inhabited sacred sites or blessed certain cities. The question was not one of belief. The question was, “How do I keep these gods happy?”

Happy gods, you see, protect your community. Happy gods make sure that the rains come at the right time for your crops. Happy gods keep the destroying insects away. Happy gods make for a good harvest. Happy gods will protect you when a neighboring city decides that they didn’t have a good harvest and they want to steal yours.

Different cultures had different ideas about how to keep the gods happy, but in general it came down to this: perform the right rituals at the right times. That might mean animal sacrifice, it might mean chant this chant, it might mean everybody join the parade down the main street, it might mean a major sporting event. Keep the gods happy.

That wasn’t how Judaism worked, at least not in the village synagogues, where the teachers worked hard to understand the ways God expected them to live out their lives. Sometimes they were concerned with elements of home ritual, the exercises of ritual cleanliness, but they were also concerned with the questions of relationships and behavior. What did God expect of people as they lived together in community?

Christians retained the ethical standards of Jewish teaching, though they left behind many of the ritual practices. They continued to meet and worship in the style of the Jewish synagogue rather than creating a sacrifice system like the Romans. With their understanding of God’s forgiveness to human beings, they emphasized the need to trust in God’s grace as the central act of pious people. God’s grace, they concluded, called for a response, a foundational reliance upon what God had done and what God would do. They called it “faith.”

But they also faced a significant theological problem, and we still face it today.

What is the power of faith? What impact does it have? What difference does it make?

It was a big question for first century Christians. They were out of step with those around them, and it put them at a disadvantage in day-to-day life. Public officials might be sympathetic, but they might not. The letters of the Apostle Paul reveal that he suffered repeated arrest, imprisonment, and beatings for his activity as a Christian preacher. Some Roman governors were indifferent to Christians, but others were actively hostile. After the great fire of Rome in 64, the Emperor Nero blamed Christians for the catastrophe as a way to deflect criticism from himself.

It's strange how things don't change very much. Public officials get criticized; they some way to blame somebody for it or for something entirely different, whatever the facts might be.

The author of Hebrews addressed that question of impact by listing the ways faith had changed the lives of people in the Bible. Abraham had his children. Moses freed the Hebrew people from slavery. Rahab survived the invasion of the Israelites. Gideon won battles. David became king.

"This 'hall of fame of faith,'" writes Christopher T. Holmes at Working Preacher, "does more than describe what faith is; it also illustrates what faith requires. Faith is active and demanding."

The first effect of faith, then, is to keep one connected to God's expectations. Christianity is not a sit-around-and-do-nothing kind of religion. It's a religion that recognizes need and suffering and steps forth to address it. It's a religion that summons us to aid the desperate and to protect the oppressed. It's a religion that calls us to make tomorrow better than today. Abraham, Samuel, and many others did just that.

But then the message turns. "Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging and even chains and imprisonment." Active faith does not guarantee victory. It does not guarantee success.

As Mary Foskett writes at Working Preacher, "The stories of men and women of faith that the writer summons to mind for the readers not only weaves the community's own story with those of the ones who have come before, it also connects them to the story of Jesus. For the writer and the community, Jesus is the consummate model of faith. In the same way that he disregarded the shame that accompanied his suffering, so can those who seek to follow 'by faith' set aside shame and endure the kind of suffering that can accompany the life of discipleship."

Another effect of faith is to provide a way to understand at least some of our suffering, that it can be a consequence of an active faith. Not all suffering is, mind you. If I walk out in front of a car and get hit, my suffering is a result of carelessness, not faith. But if I describe the national

economy in accurate numbers and get fired for it, and my faith calls me to truth, then yes: that's suffering for faith.

The author of Hebrews summoned up another image that you may have recognized, and you may not. As is true of today's long-distance road races, athletes in the first century returned to the stadium to complete a long run. The crowd would cheer to encourage them all the way to the finish line. That's what the author of Hebrews had in mind when describing this "great cloud of witnesses." What a wonderful way to think of how our ancestors in the faith support us. Can you hear them cheering you on?

As Debie Thomas writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "Living as I do in a culture that worships individualism, I'm quick to assume that I'm alone, unseen, and unfettered in my spiritual life. But I'm not; I'm surrounded. I'm surrounded by witnesses whose testimonies both console and challenge me. I'm surrounded by witnesses whose stories must nuance and deepen my own. Christianity is not about me and my personal Jesus, doing our own private thing together. Ours is a profoundly communal faith, one that spans place, culture, race, ethnicity, and time."

Faith gives us companions. It gives us supporters. It gives us fans to cheer for us from the stands. It gives us people to help us understand. It gives us people to work with. Faith means we are not alone.

It's not just other Christians, those of our time and those of the past, who accompany us. It's God. Faith is the way we maintain not just our awareness, but our relationship, with God. Faith, especially an active faith, means that we're not just trying to keep an uncaring deity "happy." We're in an ongoing and growing relationship with a real personality.

This doesn't bring us to perfection – that's still coming – but it does mean that we face the struggles of life and the triumphs of life in God's company. Faith doesn't necessarily lead to suffering, and it doesn't necessarily lead to success, but it does lead to God's grace. Faith guides our actions, it summons up encouragement, and it places us in the constant presence of God's love.

That's power. That's a real power.

The power of faith is to guide us, to strengthen us, and to hold us in the arms of God.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson