

Lesson 18: 2LCF Chapter 14: Of Saving Faith

*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing;
it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*
Ephesians 2:8-9

Just recently, I came across the testimony of a professing Christian that highlights the reason why every person needs to understand the importance of biblical saving faith. While sharing his testimony, this individual relayed that he grew up in a Christian home where his parents served as missionaries in a foreign missions context. When this man reached his late teens, he began to be afflicted by feelings of fear and condemnation; he felt that he was the object of God's displeasure. This feeling haunted him and he didn't know what to do about it. Then, one day, the man indicated that he experienced an event that marked the beginning of his Christian life.

The following is a summary of his conversion experience: One day, while this man was grappling with the palpable feeling of the Father's disapproval, he heard an audible voice that said to him, "I'm proud of you." Immediately, the man felt that this voice could not be any other voice except God's. At once, his conscience was clear and he felt that he became a Christian in that moment.

While some may rejoice at a testimony like this, it demonstrates a serious deficit in the faith of many modern Christians. Nowhere in this man's testimony is there a recognition of the sinfulness of man, the holiness of God, or the atoning work of Christ. Nowhere is there mention of the grace of God, the forgiveness of God, or the general call of God to come to Him on His terms. Nowhere is there any mention of the need for repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

As I read this testimony, I was forced to conclude that this was not a Christian testimony. It contained no saving faith in Christ, but only a naive faith in the supposed inherent goodness of oneself. It was a faith that was no faith at all. Most devastatingly, it was the testimony of a teacher at a Christian school, whose job it is to instruct children and minister the gospel to their souls.

Few topics of study are more important than that of saving faith. As Mark Sarver notes,

Scripture passages abound in which faith is expressly declared as necessary for salvation. The presence or absence of saving faith is a matter of supreme and eternal consequence. If faith is so indispensable for our eternal well-being, the immense importance of having Scriptural views of the nature of saving faith is obvious. The subject at hand calls for diligent and careful study.¹⁹³

Similarly Thomas Watson has stated: "Faith is the golden clasp that knits us to Christ."¹⁹⁴

It is necessary, therefore, that we ensure that we possess the true golden clasp which knits us to Christ, and not a counterfeit that is unable to keep us secure in Christ. In the following lesson, we will discuss this most important theme of saving faith.

¹⁹³ Mark Sarver, "Chapter Fourteen: Of Saving Faith," in *A New Exposition of the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, ed. Rob Ventura (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2022), 254.

¹⁹⁴ Thomas Watson, "A Christian on Earth Still in Heaven," *Discourses*, 1:280.

The following outline of chapter 14 has been provided:

Outline

- I. The Source of Saving Faith (paragraph 1)
 - A. The Personal Agent Involved
 - B. The Instrumental Means Involved
- II. The Acts of Saving Faith (paragraph 2)
 - As to Scripture:
 - A. It basically embraces its excellency
 - B. It appropriately receives its entirety
 - C. It principally believes its essence, the gospel of Christ
- III. The Distinctiveness of Saving Faith (paragraph 3)
 - A. The fact of its distinctiveness
 - i. The fact qualified
 - ii. The fact emphasized
 - B. The fruit of its distinctiveness¹⁹⁵

Paragraph 1.

The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word; by which also, and by the administration of baptism and the Lord's supper, prayer, and other means appointed of God, it is increased and strengthened.

2 Cor. 4:13; Eph. 2:8; Rom. 10:14,17; Luke 17:5; 1 Pet. 2:2; Acts 20:32

Exposition

Paragraph one of the Confession rightly puts forward a saving faith that is all of grace and all of God.

The Personal Agent

Firstly, faith is referred to as a “grace” worked by the Spirit of God in a believer. Here the framers of the Confession will allow no glory to go to the one who possesses faith. Faith is not the discovery of something worthy in oneself, but it is grace God bestows upon His elect.

Sarver makes several observations about the Confession's summary of saving faith:

- 1) The reason why anyone believes is not due to human volition, but due to divine grace.
- 2) Those are enabled to believe are God's elect (Titus 1:1)
- 3) Apart from divine enabling, sinners are unable to believe.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 5th ed. (Welwyn Garden City, UK: EP Books, 2016), 218-19.

¹⁹⁶ Mark Sarver, “Chapter Fourteen: Of Saving Faith,” in *A New Exposition of the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, ed. Rob Ventura (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2022), 254.

These truths are plainly taught in the following passages:

Acts 18:27

And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who **through grace had believed**...

Ephesians 2:8-9

For **by grace** you have been saved **through faith**. And **this is not your own doing**; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Philippians 1:29

For **it has been granted** to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only **believe in him** but also suffer for his sake,

Philippians 1:6

And I am sure of this, that **he who began a good work in you** will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Acts 13:48

And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and **as many as were appointed to eternal life believed**.

Titus 1:1

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of **the faith of God's elect** and their knowledge of the truth

Hebrews 12:1b-2a

let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, **the founder** and perfecter of our faith...

This word “founder” in Greek plainly conveys that Jesus Christ (not the believer) is the author of one’s faith. Here the word translated “faith” is “ἀρχηγόσα”. Here a “founder” is one who “causes something to begin—‘initiator, founder, originator.’”¹⁹⁷

The Instrumental Means

Francis of Assisi is often quoted as saying: “Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.” Whether or not this accusation is true or not, only the Lord knows. However, this is not what Scripture teaches, nor is it the position of the framers of the Confession. Scripture teaches the following:

Romans 10:14

14 How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? 15 And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”

1 Corinthians 1:18

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

¹⁹⁷ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 654.

The Confession also indicates that one's faith can be increased and strengthened through other ordinary means of God's grace, such as the ordinances, prayer, and other means. This may include the ministry of other Christians, the example of others, trials and testing, persecutions, etc.

Paragraph 2

By this faith a Christian believes to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word for the authority of God himself, and also apprehends an excellency therein above all other writings and all things in the world, as it bears forth the glory of God in his attributes, the excellency of Christ in his nature and offices, and the power and fullness of the Holy Spirit in his workings and operations: and so is enabled to cast his soul upon the truth consequently believed; and also acts differently upon that which each particular passage thereof contains; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life and that which is to come; but the principle acts of saving faith have immediate relation to Christ, accepting, receiving, and resting upon him alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace. Acts 24:14; Ps. 27:7-10; 119:72; 2 Tim. 1:12; John 15:14; Isa. 66:2; Heb. 11:13; John 1:12; Acts 16:31; Gal. 2:20; Acts 15:11

Exposition

Up until this point, we have been operating with an assumed definition of faith. Here the Confession outlines two types of faith that together constitute a biblical saving faith. Theologians have called these "General Faith" and "Special Faith".

General Faith

General faith has been described as "faith in the truth of Christianity... the infallibility of Scripture... and the factuality of its message." "It involves a firm persuasion of the universal truthfulness and incomparable excellence of biblical revelation."¹⁹⁸

It has been said: "The more we examine this Book, which continually sparkles with the glory of God, the more our confidence in the Bible grows."¹⁹⁹

As our confidence in the divine revelation of God grows, our obedience to its commands, trembling at its threatenings, and embracing of its promises will grow in exact proportion.

Compare the faithless heart of Jehoiakim with the faithful witness of Ezra:

Jeremiah 36:21-24

21 Then the king sent Jehudi to get the scroll, and he took it from the chamber of Elishama the secretary. And Jehudi read it to the king and all the officials who stood beside the king. 22 It was the ninth month, and the king was sitting in the winter house, and there was a fire burning in the fire pot before him. 23 As Jehudi read three or four columns, the king would cut them off with a knife and throw them into the fire in the fire pot, until the entire scroll was consumed in the fire that was in the fire pot. 24 Yet neither the king nor any of his servants who heard all these words was afraid, nor did they tear their garments.

¹⁹⁸ Mark Sarver, "Chapter Fourteen: Of Saving Faith," in *A New Exposition of the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, ed. Rob Ventura (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2022), 257.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 259.

Ezra 10:1-3

While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children, gathered to him out of Israel, for the people wept bitterly. 2 And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, of the sons of Elam, addressed Ezra: "We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. 3 Therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God, and let it be done according to the Law.

Isaiah 66:2

But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.

Special Faith

General faith is necessary for saving faith, but one cannot truly be saved from the wrath of God apart from "Special Faith" in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not enough to believe in the authority of the Bible—one must believe in one to which all of Scripture points:

John 5:39-40

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, 40 yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.

The Confession defines faith in Christ as "accepting, receiving, and resting." Sarver has pointed out that this is closely connected to the early Protestant teaching that saving faith consists of three constituent elements:

1) Notitia (Knowledge)

An individual must possess a saving knowledge of the gospel, including a basic understanding of the nature of God, the plight of man, and the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

2) Assensus (Assent)

Sarver notes: "By this assent the believer not only knows the contents of the gospel but also believes they are true (the intellectual element of assent).... By this assent the sinner not only believes the gospel is true but also that Christ is suitable and sufficient for his case."

3) Fiducia (Trust)

It is by trusting in Jesus Christ alone for salvation that one is truly justified before God. Trusting faith is what distinguished saving faith from a demonic faith. Sarver notes that: "Trusting is saving faith's most definitive act... trust is an implicit reliance upon Christ alone for one's salvation. It is a whole-souled engagement of the person of the sinner as lost to the person of Christ as able and willing to save. In this engagement, the sinner abandons all reliance on himself and all other human resources, and rest in Christ alone for his salvation."²⁰⁰

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 262-64.

Paragraph 3

This faith, although it be in different stages, and may be weak or strong, yet it is in the least degree of it different in the kind or nature of it, as is all other saving grace, from the faith and common grace of temporary believers; and therefore, though it may be many times assailed and weakened, yet it gets the victory, growing up in many to the attainment of a full assurance through Christ, who is both the author and finisher of our faith.

Heb. 5:13,14; Matt. 6:30; Rom. 4:19,20; 2 Pet. 1:1; Eph. 6:16; 1 John 5:4,5; Heb. 6:11,12; Col. 2:2; Heb. 12:2

Exposition

Here the Confession plainly teaches that it is not the strength of the faith that saves, but the object of that faith, no matter how strong or weak it may be.

On this point, Joel Beeke writes:

If we start qualifying our faith, we destroy the gospel. Our faith may be weak, immature, timid, even indiscernible at times, but if it is real faith it is justifying faith... Faith's value in justification does not lie in any degree in itself but in its uniting us to Christ and His glorious achievement.²⁰¹

Thomas Watson adds: "The promise says not whoever has a giant-faith, that can remove mountains, that can stop the mouths of lions, shall be saved; but whosoever believes, be his faith ever so small."²⁰²

Martin Luther concludes:

Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times... Because of it, without compulsion, a person is ready and glad to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to God who has shown him this grace. Thus it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire.²⁰³

²⁰¹ Joel R. Beeke, "*Justification by Faith Alone*," in *Justification by Faith Alone*, ed. Don Kister (Morgan, Pa SOis bio Gioria Publications, 1995), 93-94.

²⁰² Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (1890; repx, Edinburgh: The Baner of Truth Trust, 1958; rev. ed, 1965; repr. 1974), 220.

²⁰³ Martin Luther, "*Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*," in LW 35.370-71 = WA DB7:11.