

"In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (Romans 11:5)

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The Truth About Faith

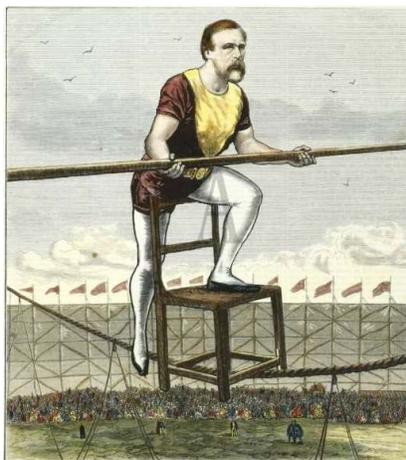
Understanding the Hebraic background of faith and its application for our lives

by Galen Peterson

A century and a half ago Charles Blondin was a renowned tightrope walker. In particular he had an obsession with crossing Niagara Falls on a tightrope.

In 1859 he was given permission to do so and was able to cross a line nearly a quarter mile long and 160 feet above the water. He then repeated the challenge many times, before crowds of over 100,000 people, adding new enhancements along the way, including balancing a chair on the rope and standing on it. He did it blindfolded, in a sack, and walking on stilts. He even did it while pushing a wheelbarrow, carrying a stove out to the middle and then cooking an omelet, which he then lowered to a boat below for the passengers to eat.

As the story goes, he once taunted the crowd by asking, "Do you believe I can carry a person



across in this wheelbarrow?" The crowd answered, "Yes, yes!" To which Blondin replied, "Then who will volunteer to get in the wheelbarrow?"

It's been said that Blondin's actions were an illustration of faith. Climbing on his back in order to be carried across Niagara Falls would require a great deal of faith in the acrobat to complete the task. This would be in keeping with the common

understanding of faith being placing your trust in the hands of someone or something else and not knowing the final outcome, but believing that it will take place just as you hope it will.

This understanding is brought out in the Bible:

"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

(Heb. 11:1)

A clear word picture that helps us to understand the Hebraic concept of faith is found in Exodus 17. The story is a simple one. The Israelites had left Egypt, and just before they received the Torah on Mt. Sinai they got into a conflict with the army of Amalek.

As their leader, Moses went up to the top of the hill to overlook the battle. Somehow Moses realized that there was an association between his posture

and the results on the battlefield. But he couldn't sustain his arms up in the air, and his soldiers started to fall on the battlefield. So Aaron, the brother of Moses, and another Israelite named Hur positioned Moses on a stone and then took the hands of Moses and held them up by themselves. The text says that they were able to keep the hands of Moses "steady until the sun set" (Ex. 17:12). And in the end, they prevailed over the army of Amalek.

The Heb. word rendered here as "steady" is *emunah* — עֲמוּנָה. This is the only place in Scripture where *emunah* is translated in this manner. Elsewhere this word is associated with the concept of "faithfulness."

So even though *emunah* is not translated as the word "faith" in Ex. 17, this biblical episode nevertheless does illustrate the Hebraic understanding of what faith meant to them. Like sitting on a rock and being supported by your friends, *emunah* conveys the idea of firmness, steadiness, and loyalty.

What, then, makes something firm and steady, and results in loyalty? The answer is in the Hebrew once again.

Emunah also shares the same root as the word *emet* — אֱמֶת which is typically translated as "truth." Thus in this understanding, faith is not just blind trust based on desire, it is a strong certainty based on truth.

That is where the earlier emphasis in the book of Hebrews on evidence comes in. In a court of law, a witness presents evidence in the form of a testimony. A judge or jury who



was not present when the situation in question took place hears "evidence of things not seen." When the judge or jury deems the evidence to be true, that witness is considered to be faithful or reliable. And they can be confident that their conclusion is the correct one. The evidence enables you to issue a conviction.

All this to say that faith is not mere wishful thinking or even only the "substance of things hoped for." The biblical definition and the Hebraic understanding both show that faith is also a reasonable decision based on factual truth—it is "the evidence of things not seen."

Only once in all of the *Tanach* (Old Testament) is *emunah* translated as "faith." That is found in the book of Habakkuk: "The righteous will live by his faith" (Hab. 2:4). The vast majority of the time it is translated as "faithful, faithfully or faithfulness."

So if you want a more literal picture of Ex. 17:12, it would be—"Moses' hands were faithful until the sun set." That wording doesn't make sense when you think of faith in its most common

way. But it does make sense when you base it on the Hebraic understanding of the concept.

Moses could look to one side and see Aaron right there holding up one of his hands. And he could look to the other side and see Hur holding up the other one. He didn't just have to hope that his arms would hold up. He could be confident they would stay upright because he wasn't merely relying on his own strength. He was firmly in the grasp of others who were literally supporting his cause. His was a confidence based on evidence—in this case the acts of Aaron and Hur.

Thus *emunah* is correctly brought into our English Bibles as "faithful, faithfully or faithfulness." In other words, for faith to be genuine, it has to be *faithful*. There has to be a response of action on our part to validate that which we believe to be true.

Usually when we think of the word faith we place the emphasis on what we believe, not what we do. And this is certainly consistent linguistically because the Greek word for "belief"—*pisteuo* is closely related to *pistis*, meaning "faith." And when we consider the great context of Scripture, it is clear that salvation comes through belief in the atoning work of Messiah Yeshua (Jesus) alone:

"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Eph. 2:8-9)

This doctrine is described as being *sola fide*—"by faith alone."

Unlike religions that teach you can get to heaven by doing certain things of a religious nature, “by faith alone” means that we are incapable of saving ourselves from sin.

The only work sufficient for that purpose is the death of the Son of God on the Cross, not by any act of piety that pales in comparison. And God then credits us with His righteousness when we believe in Him and what He did for us (Rom. 4:22-24). That’s what it means to be saved by faith alone.

But in our efforts to emphasize salvation originating from God alone, not by our own merits, we can miss the completion of our calling—not just to be *saved* but to *serve* the Lord with every aspect of our lives. Or to put it another way, we need to be faithful with the salvation that we have been given. Notice what Eph. 2 goes on to say:

“For we are His workmanship, created in Messiah Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them” (v. 10)

Paul is not calling for works that save us, but works *because* we are saved. James says a similar thing in his letter:

“Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. But someone may well say, ‘You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works’ ” (James 2:17,18).

Like Paul, James is not teaching salvation by works, which would be a contradiction of the biblical principle of

salvation “by faith alone.” Indeed James makes that very clear in his previous chapter (1:6-8). He is affirming that our salvation should lead to good works on our part that will be pleasing to God. James is saying that the deeds we do are evidence of the reality of our faith.

He is just echoing Isaiah who called people to put meaning into their religious rituals by doing simple deeds like feeding the hungry and clothing those in need, and in so doing, their righteousness would shine forth (Is. 58:1-8). And it was Yeshua who declared virtually the same thing, saying that the righteous persons of this world feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the stranger and the one who is sick, and visit those who are imprisoned (Mat. 25:37-39). He even said that in so doing, it was like ministering to Himself (v. 40).

When we take into account the big picture of God’s Word, there is a consistent pairing of faith and truth, faith and obedience, faith and serving the Lord, faith and caring for others.

It starts with the good work that God begins in us by redeeming our souls, and then is reflected in our good deeds. This is what gives life to our faith. And it is the evidence that what we believe is true, because we are willing to live it out, because we are not just being people of faith, but people who are faithful.

Characteristics of people of faith

When we take into account the whole counsel of Scripture, a portrait emerges that inevitably

leads us to the conclusion that we have a rather high personal calling:

True people of faith are set on a firm foundation.

Today that is the rock of Messiah and we must place our hope and confidence in Him. As the Scriptures record:

“For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Messiah Jesus” (1 Cor. 3:11).

True people of faith recognize that we never do anything that earns our salvation. It comes through belief in Yeshua alone.

True people of faith are devoted to God’s Word.

That means considering carefully what He is saying to us and then giving it more than lip service and token religiosity, but truly living out those principles daily in every setting.

True people of faith serve others who are in need.

It is easy to talk about our faith, or even to be an expert on doctrine. It is another story when it comes to doing the things that reflect what we believe, by giving our resources, sacrificially and generously.

The reality of a manifested faith is being loving, merciful and forgiving. It means actually feeding the hungry and clothing the naked when we have so much to eat and to wear ourselves. It means caring for the stranger in need and the one who is sick, and visiting those who are imprisoned, while having to go out of our way and give up our time.

True people of faith trust in God to provide for our own needs, even when it seems hopeless and impossible.

We all face spiritual battles from time to time, even continually. If we want to experience victory over perceived threats in our lives, like the Amalekites were to Israel, we have to be people of faith. We demonstrate our faithfulness in times of trials when we act in spiritual maturity and employ the weapons of spiritual warfare that we have been given by God. One of those weapons we have in our arsenal is “the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one” (Eph. 6:16).

True people of faith uplift one another.

We are called to be like Aaron and Hur, exhorting and encouraging, not tearing others down like the common way in our culture today. This is vital, even when it is genuinely difficult to hold up someone else’s arms and it would be much easier just to let them drop.

Aaron and Hur had to be willing to come alongside Moses

and to prop him up, and to stay there as long as needed. The same is true for all of us.

Moreover, Moses had to be willing to let them help. We, too, have to let others lift us up. Sometimes you will find yourself in a situation like Moses where you need other people to hold up your hands and arms. We need to show our faithfulness by allowing them to help, rather than letting our pride get in the way.

True people of faith exalt God’s name,

It is by faith that we are able to praise and trust in Him, in spite of the trials and difficulties of life that could so easily tempt us to doubt His sovereignty over every circumstance of life. We all would be wise to ask ourselves if our lives are marked by praising God in all things.

Faith, then, is taking God’s

truths and putting them into action. It is a faith that says, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13). It’s a total dedication to living our lives in the exact way that God exhorts us to do. Then, and only then can we be considered truly people of faith, and thus able to hear those highly valued words of Yeshua:

“Well done, good and faithful servant” (Mat. 25:23).



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Ministry and Faith

Everything we do in ministry at A.R.M. is based on faith. It is at the heart of our message in witnessing (this article is based on a sermon given at our Brit Hadasha Fellowship). We also live by faith, trusting in God’s people to sustain us financially & in prayer. And it gives us the confidence to rely upon Him to bring about redeemed lives for His glory.

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