

FR 126

“Before Faith Came” - “Faith Has Come”

Paul used the expression, “*before faith came*” (RSV), or “*before this faith came*,” (NIV). Then he added, “*now that faith has come*,” and stated that faith had been revealed. Was he saying that there was a time when there was no faith and that faith had to come by means of God’s intervention? An investigation as to what Paul was explaining might bring some startling new insights.

Our focus will be on this paragraph with its context: “*Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise*

” (Gal. 3:23-29).

In a commonly used literary device (metonymy), one element or feature may be used to denote all that is related to it. For instance, we may say the White House issued a report or the Pentagon made a new regulation. We understand that buildings do not act as humans but the name of the building is used in place of all the authoritative people involved in those structures.

In like manner Paul characterized two covenants by the two words, LAW and FAITH. “Before faith came” Israel was confined under law. Here Paul used “law” to characterize the old covenant which was based upon law, that is, the Ten Commandments (Dt. 9:9-11). The Law of Moses was added to regulate those under the covenant. It was a code of law which required performance. So another emphatic feature was works, that is, works of law by which a person was considered righteous, a sort of merit system by which one was judged.

Israel was held in restraint by this system of law until FAITH was revealed. Was Paul saying that nobody had faith in old covenant times? No. It required as much personal faith to live under the old covenant as under the new covenant. Israel claimed Abraham, who was acclaimed for his faith, as their father. God had made a covenant with Abraham based upon faith which the covenant of law did not annul. Under the covenant with Israel personal faith was ever-present and it was ultimately rewarded, not because of meritorious works of law, but by the grace of God in Christ when those under law were redeemed (Gal. 4:4-5). The law was their restraining custodian to bring them to Christ for their redemption long after they had died.

Believers related to God in obedience to a system of law when, in reality, law cannot save, and their works had no merit to save them. But faith was revealed. That does not mean that personal faith was just then discovered, revealed, and given individuals as a personal gift. Here Paul is speaking of a new covenant of grace to be accessed by faith. When Christ came, faith came. That is not speaking of Jesus' birth but his provision through the Gospel. THE FAITH is the message of the Gospel, that is, salvation through Christ. So, Christ becomes the personification of the Gospel, the new covenant, through whom we access grace and relate to God.

Paul draws the conclusion that, since faith has come, they no longer depended upon being physical descendants of Abraham or subjects of the custodian but that they became sons of God by faith through their putting on Christ in baptism. In Christ no racial, social, or gender difference held merit, but all were made one in Christ. They had claimed to be children of Abraham and Israel by physical birth, but now through the spiritual birth they became true children of Abraham and God. Paul's conclusion should arouse grave concern for most evangelical Christians who accept faith as the only condition of salvation.

No doubt, some of you are raising objections about Paul's conclusion. You may have been convinced that "when faith came" means personal faith without any work of obedience or acceptance. If that is true with you, please restudy the whole setting of this paragraph and other references as well.

"The faith" is not referring to personal belief but to the system of the new covenant whose message had been delivered. It was "*THE FAITH which was once for all delivered to the saints*" (Jude 3). Elymas tried to turn the proconsul from THE FAITH (Acts 13:8). Paul exhorted some "*to continue in THE FAITH*" (Acts 14:22). Paul was preaching "*THE FAITH he once tried to destroy*" (Gal. 2:23). Then there is mention of "*the household of faith*" (Gal. 6:10). God unites us all in ONE FAITH (Eph. 4:4). The term "the faith" encompasses all that relates to salvation in Christ. Notice that in our text Paul indicates that faith came when Christ came.

Because Israel was under a covenant of law did not mean that they were void of faith. In similar manner, characterizing the new covenant system as "the faith," does not preclude or rule out any obedient action on our part. Those under the covenant of law (the Ten Commandments) were also given a code of law through Moses to direct their lives. Those brought into the new covenant relationship through the Gospel were also given writings to direct their service to God. These were not a code of law, but they urged the fulfilling of Jesus' law / principle of action to love God and man by means of instructions, commands, exhortations, and warnings. Dismissing all these as ineffective works of merit would make their apostolic authors look over-lording and stupid! The truth is that obedient response is an essential element of each individual's faith (James 2:14-26).

It does not surprise us when it is reported, “*And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith*” (Acts 7:6). These three clauses form a Hebrew parallelism. In the first and last, the word of God (the gospel of salvation in Christ) identifies with “the faith.” When it was obeyed, the number of disciples increased, but not before. Their personal faith was completed only after obedience. The negative side of this is the warning of “*vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus*” (2 Thes. 1:8). Those who obey not are in contrast to those who believe (v. 9-10).

“*The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ*” (John 1:17). Under the first covenant righteousness was sought by keeping a code of law. “*Where there is no law, there is no transgression*” (Rom. 4:15). Jesus gave no such set of laws that made us sinners. Yet we are as helpless to save ourselves as Jews were in keeping a law that had no saving power. Physical life does not give us immortality but a free offer of eternal life was announced when faith came. When Christ came, grace and truth came, for he personified both. “Truth” is not referring to facts or teachings, as is often thought, but he was the fulfillment of all that was typified in the Law of Moses. He was the truth the rituals of the law represented. In fulfilling them all, he could offer grace -- the gift of life.

“*He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God*” (John 1:11-12). Those who believed / received him were not made children of God but were given power to become children of God through submission to his will in obedience of faith. In our text, Paul included baptism as a part of that obedience. I emphasize that point again because so many are denying its connection with the new birth. Paul also gave Titus a comprehensive summation of what we are trying to present here: “*..when the goodness and kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life*” (Titus 3:4-7). Paul did not consider works of obedience to the faith to be misguided efforts to earn salvation by meritorious works.

In the first three chapters of Ephesians, Paul addressed Gentile disciples. Formerly, they had been “*alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise*” (2:12). But THE FAITH had come to them “*according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him..*” (1:9). They had heard the word of truth, the gospel of their salvation, and had believed. The covenant relationship had been offered them and they had accepted it though Paul mentions the word

only once to these Gentiles (1:13). Their belief had led to their initiation into the covenant relationship by baptism (Acts 19:1-7).

In this context we will look at the familiar and favored text in Ephesians 2:8-10. Please allow me to insert parenthetical comments in it. “*For by grace you have been saved through faith* (To them THE FAITH had come. It was the covenant of grace through faith.); *and this is not your own doing* (The covenant offering salvation was of God’s initiative and without their advice or device.), *it is the gift of God--- not because of works, lest any man should boast.* (No man could boast of aiding God in offering a covenant of grace through faith. Instead, the bringing of them into covenant relationship was God’s work purposely that they might serve through good works.). *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*”

The same Paul who held up Abraham as the model for justification by faith also wrote this message to the Ephesians. Rather than accusing Paul of presenting conflicting ideas, I will propose that he recognized different kinds of works. He did not classify actions of acceptance of the covenant relationship, or obedience of faith, or good works of a sanctified life as efforts to assist God in offering THE FAITH for man’s salvation.

To dismiss actions of acceptance is to stop short of covenant relationship. To ascribe meritorious effort to obedience of faith and good works of the sanctified life makes the many instructions, exhortations, and warnings meaningless.

In my limited experience, I have found no teacher that has answered all the questions relating to faith and works. I am not so arrogant as to make that claim for myself. These thoughts are thrown into the mix for your consideration.

(Cecil Hook; June 2002) []