

FAITH

IT'S ALWAYS BEEN A MATTER OF **TRUST**



BRYSON SMITH

Guidebooks for Life



Everyone knows that faith is central to the Christian life. But what is ‘faith’? What makes it so important? What are we meant to have faith *in*, and what difference should our faith make to everyday life?

In six short chapters, Bryson Smith takes us on a climb—a climb to look out at the magnificent wisdom of God and understand faith in all its glory. In the course of this journey, we start to grasp what a life of faith looks like and why faith is more precious than gold.

About the author



Bryson Smith is part of the ministry team at Dubbo Presbyterian Church in rural NSW, Australia. He has been living the faith for over 30 years and never ceases to be amazed by God’s goodness and patience with him. Bryson is married to Sue and they have three children. He enjoys listening to blues music, watching good movies and dragging a camper-trailer around Australia.



ISBN 978-1-921441-03-5



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Bible-based essentials

for your Christian journey

Faith is part of a series of straightforward, practical Christian books from Matthias Media which deal with the important nuts-and-bolts topics that Christians need to know about as we walk each day with our Master.

Some Christian books are all theory and no practical application; others are all stories and tips with no substance. The Guidebooks for Life aim to achieve a vital balance—that is, to dig into the Bible and discover what God is telling us there, as well as applying that truth to our daily Christian lives.

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Faith

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Matthias Media

(St Matthias Press Ltd ACN 067 558 365)

Email: info@matthiasmedia.com.au

Internet: www.matthiasmedia.com.au

Please visit our website for current postal and telephone contact information.

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ISBN 978 1 921441 03 5

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Cover design and typesetting by Lankshear Design.

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Chapter 1

THE ESSENCE OF FAITH

WHEN SUE AND I GOT MARRIED, a very great honour was bestowed on me. Not only did Sue's parents entrust me with their precious daughter, but, as a sign of true acceptance into the family, Sue's father presented me with a precious heirloom: the Mackenzie family lawnmower, which was ceremonially passed over into my safekeeping. It was an emotional time.

Unfortunately I could never get the rotten thing to start! Judging by the look of it, I suspect that that lawnmower was one of the first to ever roll off the production line. No matter what I did, I could not get it to go. No matter what bits of the engine I checked—no matter how much positive thinking I managed to muster up in my innermost soul—no matter what I tried, it just would **not** start.



I felt a bit embarrassed when I admitted defeat and handed the mower back to my father-in-law. I didn't want to appear ungrateful, but what's the point of relying on something that continually proves to be unreliable? Indeed, the whole lawnmower incident taught me some valuable lessons about life. I learned that trusting the untrustworthy is a heartbreaking exercise. I learned that faith only ever works when it's placed in something (or someone) that is faithful. And I learned that careful thought is required when it comes to where you put your faith.

All of this has implications for being a Christian because, as you may have already noticed, 'faith' seems to play a pretty big role in Christianity. For example, in the New Testament, whenever the apostle Paul writes to a church, more often than not, it's their faith he's concerned about. He thanks God for their faith (Col 1:3-4), he prays for their faith (Eph 3:14-17), he boasts about their faith (2 Thess 1:4), and he expresses his desire to safeguard their faith (Gal 3:1-6). Indeed, faith is so important that sometimes the New Testament uses the word 'faith' as a way of referring to the Christian gospel itself:

And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to **the faith**. (Acts 6:7)

Now I find sentences like that quite interesting. The fact that the Christian gospel can be referred to simply as "the faith" clearly reflects the fact that faith is a pretty big part of being a Christian.



In this book, we're going to try and come to a fuller understanding of what Christian faith is all about. We'll be thinking about such questions as:

- What makes faith so crucial?
- What exactly are we meant to have faith **in**?
- What were God's reasons for making our faith so important?
- What differences should our faith make to everyday life?

These are all good questions to grapple with because of the importance of faith. Furthermore, a naïve or misplaced faith will only ever lead us into confusion and disappointment. My lawn mowing experience certainly showed me that!

Base camp

In this book, we're going to climb over some pretty spectacular verses together—verses which will eventually lead us to a lookout that will help us 'see' our Christian faith more clearly. It's a climb well worth making because the view will take our breath away, and flood our lives with hope, comfort and security. It's a view that will also leave us utterly amazed by the genius and love of God.

But more of all of that later. For starters, with any climb of a serious nature, we need to establish base camp: we need to peg down some basic ideas and definitions which will help our ascent.



There are a few places in the Bible where we could do this, but I don't think there's any better place than Romans 4:21, a verse which describes the faith of Abraham as being "fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised". The context of this verse is the apostle Paul telling the Christians in Rome all about the faith Abraham displayed when God promised him that he would become the father of a great nation (cf. Gen 15:1-6). At the time, it was a pretty remarkable promise for God to make because not only was Abraham himself an old man, but his elderly wife Sarah had never been able to fall pregnant. So the idea of Abraham ever having lots of descendants was quite a stretch of the imagination. Yet Abraham still believed God. He had **faith** in God.

Paul reminds the Christians in Rome about Abraham because Abraham's faith is representative of the sort of faith we're all meant to have. Abraham is the great father of faith. At several points throughout the New Testament, Abraham is referred to as a model for us to follow.¹ We should also have a faith like his—a faith which involves being **fully convinced that God is able to do what he has promised**.

So let's think a bit more closely about what that means. As we shall see, it's a great place to build a base camp.

1 Apart from Romans 4, other examples of this can be seen in Galatians 3:7-9 and Hebrews 11:8-12, 17-19.



Fully convinced

It is noteworthy that Paul describes Abraham's faith in terms of him being "fully convinced". This is not what some people expect when it comes to faith. The phrase "fully convinced" implies that the person has seen evidence relevant to the case, has considered any arguments that have been put forward, and has reasoned and assessed any facts. This is how juries become fully convinced of their verdicts: they only reach this stage after hearing all the witnesses, considering all the evidence, hearing the arguments and then coming to a reasoned decision.

However, lots of people don't think of faith as being like this. Faith often seems like a bit of a leap in the dark. Faith is often considered as merely an irrational feeling rather than reasoned trust. The online Microsoft *Encarta* dictionary, for example, has as its first definition of 'faith', "belief in, devotion to, or trust in somebody or something, especially without logical proof". Other dictionary definitions say much the same thing. The *Merriam-Webster* defines 'faith' as being "belief and trust in and loyalty to God". However, it also defines faith as "firm belief in something for which there is no proof".²

This sort of faith is not biblical faith. Biblical faith is not a hopeful belief in the absence of evidence or proof; it is a trust based on being fully convinced about something. Biblical faith involves looking at the evidence and making a considered decision.

2 <http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/faith>



Now, in Abraham's case, he was **fully convinced** that God was able to do what he'd promised because he'd already had first-hand experience of God keeping his word. This was because, along with promising Abraham lots of descendents, God had also promised that Abraham would be blessed. This promise had been already fulfilled before Abraham's eyes: Genesis 12-14 reads like a rags-to-riches story! Everything Abraham did turned to gold. These life experiences gave him a taste of what the God of the universe could do. For this reason, Abraham believed God when, in Genesis 15, God promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. It wasn't that Abraham put his brain into neutral and simply believed because he thought it was a nice idea; he believed God because he had already seen God in action. He knew what God was capable of, and because of that, he was fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

The New Testament consistently teaches that our faith, like Abraham's faith, also comes from being fully persuaded of certain facts. Consider the opening words of Luke's Gospel:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent



Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

Luke wrote to a person named Theophilus to tell him about Jesus. Notice the sorts of words and phrases he used: “eyewitnesses”, “having followed all things closely”, “orderly account”, “that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught”. It’s pretty clear that Luke did not want Theophilus to believe something for which there was no evidence! He wanted Theophilus to be fully convinced.

The apostle Paul said a similar thing to the unfortunately named Roman governor, Festus:

But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner.” (Acts 26:25-26)

Again, notice that the gospel is about true and reasonable things. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are historical events which happened in full sight of lots of people. They’re events which are open to scrutiny and careful investigation.³

3 It is not within the scope of this short book to provide detailed historical verification of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For those wishing to pursue the topic further, John Dickson provides an excellent introduction in his book *The Christ Files* (Blue Bottle, Sydney, 2006).



Biblical faith is, therefore, not a warm fuzzy feeling or an irrational leap in the dark. Biblical faith is a personal trust in God, based on deep reasoned convictions about true events.

At this point, it is worth noting that **because** biblical faith is based on deep conviction about true events, faith will always be expressed in action. If a person's faith does not express itself in actions, it only proves that the person was not truly and fully convinced in the first place. For this reason, faith is often closely linked with repentance within the New Testament.⁴ To 'repent' means to stop doing things that displease God, and to start doing the things that please him—that is, gratefully submitting to his rule over us.

In the Christian life, repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin. As we read God's word and trust what he tells us, we change our lives accordingly in order to obey God. Repentance and faith are therefore both part of the same process, as God, through his word and Spirit, shapes us into Christ-likeness. If there is no real repentance, there is no genuine faith, for **not** changing our lives betrays the fact that we haven't been genuinely and fully convinced in the first place.⁵

4 An example of this can be seen in Acts 20:21. When speaking to the Ephesian church, the Apostle Paul explained that the goal of his preaching was that "they must turn to God in *repentance* and have *faith* in our Lord Jesus" (NIV).

5 This close association between faith and actions will be discussed again in more detail in chapter 4.



God is able

Our base camp verse—Romans 4:21—also helpfully points out that biblical faith is firmly grounded in what God is able to do: Abraham was “fully convinced that God **was able to do** what he had promised”. This is important because, as my lawnmower experiences demonstrated, faith only ever works when it’s placed in something (or someone) that is faithful. The good news is that God is always utterly faithful!

For someone to be truly faithful, they need to be both willing and able to keep their word. For example, imagine you’re desperate to go to the airport to catch your flight. But it’s a gloomy, rainy day. I could promise to give you a lift, but unless I actually own a car (or can borrow one), I will prove to be unfaithful in my promise. My inability is my downfall. Alternatively, I may own a car but then have second thoughts about taking it out of the garage and getting it dirty on the wet roads. In that case, my unwillingness is my downfall.

The great thing about God is that he is always willing and able to keep his word. His willingness to keep his word is most evident in the coming of Jesus Christ. Paul describes Jesus as being the “Yes” to all of God’s promises (2 Cor 1:20). In other words, Jesus brings all the pledges God made in the Old Testament to their ultimate fulfilment. These include pledges such as the ones he made to Abraham. Through Jesus, God eventually keeps his word to form a blessed, special people for himself.

That Jesus is the answer to all of God’s promises is not only a staggering statement about the importance of



Jesus Christ; it's also a wonderful statement about God's faithfulness. God is so determined to keep his promises, he was even prepared for his precious Son to leave his side in heaven, become a man and take our place on the cross. Now **that's** commitment to your word!

However, don't forget that faithfulness is not only about willingness, it's also about ability. Let's return for a moment to my kind offer to give you a lift to the airport. Another major problem I have is that I'm not the master of my own destiny. So even if I do have a car and even if I am willing to use it, things beyond my control can still happen. My car might break down; the traffic might be so heavy, we get stuck in a traffic jam and you miss your flight; a dog might chase a cat across my street in the middle of the night, causing a truck to swerve into a telegraph pole which results in a blackout, which then means my alarm clock fails to go off and I blissfully sleep through the appointed time when I should be picking you up. Trust me, it **could** happen. Circumstances beyond our control can happen to us all, and suddenly we are unable to do what we'd promised to do.

However, the great thing about God is that he is always able to do what he has promised because there are never circumstances beyond his control. We see this in the Psalms where God's faithfulness is often linked to his sovereign power. Take your time and linger over the following wonderful passages:

For the word of the LORD is upright,
and all his work is done in faithfulness.



He loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
and by the breath of his mouth all their host.
He gathers the waters of the sea as a heap;
he puts the deeps in storehouses.

Let all the earth fear the LORD;
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!
For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.

The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;
he frustrates the plans of the peoples.
The counsel of the LORD stands forever,
the plans of his heart to all generations. (Ps 33:4-11)

Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD,
your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones!
For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD?
Who among the heavenly beings is like the LORD,
a God greatly to be feared in the council of the holy ones,
and awesome above all who are around him?

O LORD God of hosts,
who is mighty as you are, O LORD,
with your faithfulness all around you?

You rule the raging of the sea;
when its waves rise, you still them.

You crushed Rahab like a carcass;
you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.

The heavens are yours; the earth also is yours;
the world and all that is in it, you have founded
them. (Ps 89:5-11)



Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD his God,
who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them,
who keeps faith forever... (Ps 146:5-6)

The Psalms repeat the same lesson over and over again: God can do anything. He made everything, he controls everything and he upholds everything. Therefore nothing can stop him from doing what he wants.

All of this makes God incredibly faithful. He is both willing and able to always do **what he says**. But those three last words in italics are important to note.

What he had promised

Our base camp verse reminds us that Abraham did not have faith in something he randomly thought up. He had faith in what God had promised him: he was “fully convinced that God was able to do **what he had promised**” (Rom 4:21). It seems obvious, but this is an aspect of faith over which there is some confusion. Nowadays, many Christians act as if faith is simply trusting in just about anything—as if faith is the same thing as the power of positive thinking. Every now and then I hear people say things like, “Oh, you’re sick, are you? Well, have faith and you’ll get better” or “Life treating you badly? Have faith; things will pick up!” or “Sorry to hear your roof is leaking. Have faith; it will fix itself.”

Okay, I made that last one up. But you get what I’m saying. Some people have the impression that, no matter



what you want to happen—no matter how harebrained a scheme it is—it’s just a matter of having faith and it will happen. Furthermore, it’s also often suggested that the only reason something **hasn’t** happened is because you don’t have **enough** faith. A Christian girl I know was once told that the reason she was still single was because she lacked enough faith to find a partner. A Christian friend of mine with a chronic bad back was once told that the only reason his back wasn’t better was because he lacked faith.⁶

These sort of comments not only reflect a poor grasp of what God has and hasn’t promised in his word; they also reflect a failure to understand that biblical faith is not about trusting in just anything. Biblical faith is about trusting confidently in the thing God has promised. Abraham only had faith that God would make him the father of a great nation because God specifically

6 Sometimes it is suggested that poor health *can* be attributed to a lack of faith because of James 5:15: “And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick...” However, I would say that this is a misreading of the verse. The root word translated ‘sick’ in most of our English Bibles is an unusual word which is also translated as ‘weary’ in other New Testament verses (see Hebrews 12:3 and Revelation 2:3). If we apply this to James 5:15, the passage takes on a whole new meaning which better fits its context. James is not referring to physically sick people but *spiritually* sick people—people who are feeling discouraged and tired (i.e. ‘weary’) in their Christian lives—possibly because they have become entangled in sin. This makes better sense of James’s use of Elijah as an example in verses 17-18, as Elijah was a man who grew despondent in his ministry (1 Kgs 19). It also strengthens the connection to verses 19-20 where James discusses brothers who have wandered from the truth.



promised him that. So unless God has specifically promised us something, we have no real basis for being confident about it.⁷

Of course, this doesn't mean we can't or shouldn't ask God for things. Of course we can. God encourages us to let our requests be made known to him because he loves to hear from us (Phil 4:6). But there is a difference between **knowing** that God can do something and **expecting** him to do it simply because we feel confident about it. Biblical faith is having a faith like Abraham's—a firm trust in the things that God has specifically promised.

The temptation is to think that this is a bad thing, and that somehow it would be better if God did the things we happen to feel positive about. In actual fact, that would be terrible. Not only is God a lot smarter than we

7 Some people might object to this idea and point to Jesus' words in Mark's Gospel: "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours" (Mark 11:24). However, the context of this verse suggests that these words are not a blanket statement that God will do everything we ask of him if we feel confident enough about it. Jesus said these words after he cleared the Jerusalem temple and cursed a poor fig tree. Taking into consideration the fact that the fig tree was a common symbol for Israel in the Old Testament, and also taking into consideration the way Mark arranged his material (fig tree—temple—fig tree), it seems clear that, in this section of Mark, Jesus was focused on the rejection of the nation of Israel as God's people because of their refusal to accept him as their Christ. When he said "whatever you ask in prayer", he was most likely referring to requests to be included in the new people of God that he was gathering. This also makes sense of why, in the very next verse, Jesus goes on to explain the importance of forgiveness since, through forgiveness, Jesus gathers his people.



are; he is always better at thinking up good things for us. So I would much prefer to have a loving, wise God working **his** promises in my life than a cosmic servant who granted my every foolish request, no matter how convicted I may feel about those requests.

The blessings from base camp

By now, I hope you've begun to see why Romans 4:21 is such a good place to build our base camp. The verse clears away a lot of the confusion and misunderstanding that surround faith. Indeed, by reminding us that biblical faith is grounded in God's faithfulness, our base camp also brings us deep and real comfort. Perhaps an illustration will help explain what I mean.

Some time ago we had a family outing to a local picnic area. While we were there, a mother and her little boy arrived. They spread their blanket on the grass and sat down near the playground, but the little boy wouldn't go over and play. There were lots of other children there, and it all seemed a bit daunting for him.

The boy looked about three years old. At first, he sat quietly next to his mum on the blanket, looking at all the other children having fun. After a while, he stood up, but stayed on the blanket, standing with one hand on his mum's shoulder. He continued to watch the other children playing. Then he got a bit bolder: he walked away and stood for a while halfway between his mum



and the playground, before running back to his mum for a cuddle. A short time later, he eventually made it all the way to the playground, slid down one slippery dip, and then sprinted all the way back to his mum and gave her a big hug.⁸ It wasn't long before the boy was playing with the other children—running, laughing and climbing over everything. But every now and then he would run back and hug his mum—as if he wanted reassurance that he was safe. Once he was secure in that, he was able to go off and join in the fun again.

I don't think we ever grow out of doing that sort of thing. All of us at different times of our lives need to feel safe. We all need to have something stable in life—somewhere where we feel sheltered. This gives us the security we need to get out there during the week and join in with life.

The critical question is, where will we get that security from? What are we looking to to make us feel safe? Many of us look to our friendships—especially our marriages—to make us feel secure and special. Others of us look to our children and families. Still others of us look to our careers or to something we're gifted at—like our musical or sporting ability. Just like that little boy who hugged his mum, we hug one—if not several—of those things in order to draw comfort from them. These are the things that give us the confidence, self-worth and security with which to face life.

8 A 'slippery dip' is a slide in a playground.



The trouble is, all of those things can be terribly fickle. Many of them are beyond our control. How will you cope if your marriage partner doesn't love you? How will you cope if your friends take advantage of you instead of supporting you? How will you cope if your children don't turn out the way you'd like? How will you cope if your career takes a nosedive and you end up losing your job? How will you cope if you have an accident and you can't play music or sport any more? If you have invested your self-worth into those sort of things, life can be very difficult. Putting your faith in the unfaithful can tear your heart out.

However, putting your faith in a faithful God results in a different story. If you have a strong personal trust in God because you are fully convinced that God is able to do what he has promised, you have a firm foundation for life. You have an anchor which will hold in any storm. There is great comfort in that.

All these truths come out of our base camp. Imagine what the summit is going to show us!

