

# **Portraits of Faith**



# Portraits of Faith

WHAT FIVE BIBLICAL CHARACTERS TEACH  
US ABOUT OUR LIFE WITH GOD

Joel R. Beeke



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*Portraits of Faith*

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2965 Leonard St. NE

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616-977-0889 / Fax 616-285-3246

orders@heritagebooks.org

www.heritagebooks.org

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**Pete and Lois VanderStel,**  
*lovers of the Savior and His gospel,  
faithful, caring encouragers and friends*



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## Foreword

The annual Evangelical Movement of Wales Conference in Aberystwyth draws hundreds of young people who crowd the galleries of the Great Hall, many with notebooks and open Bibles, and listen intently to the speakers. Some are not Christians, and very frequently during this week in which the Bible is taken seriously and explained lucidly, the Lord Jesus brings them to a saving knowledge of Himself.

At the 2003 conference, Dr. Joel Beeke gave four addresses examining the state and faith of people including Adam and Eve, the Shunammite woman, the Canaanite woman, and Caleb. He described how the Lord comes searching for very different men and women and brings them to Himself.

Years have gone by since I heard those talks, but at regular intervals since I have heard of professions of faith in different churches (including one where my daughter is a member), which have been attributed to the convicting power of the words that Dr. Beeke spoke in Aberystwyth. Doubts were resolved, questions were answered, and clarity was given in areas where hitherto there had been confusion.

Now that these addresses are in print, their usefulness is greatly increased. Ministers like myself will be glad to have such a pastoral tool. Christians young and old will be encouraged and strengthened by reading these delightful pages. And those with questions concerning the nature of saving faith will find helpful guidance in this book.

May God bless this book and increase the impact of its truth to many.

—Geoff Thomas

## **Preface to the Second Edition**

I have been privileged to speak at the annual Aberystwyth Conference in Wales on four occasions and have thoroughly enjoyed each one of them. It has to be one of the best conferences in the world for a speaker: the saints are hungry, the unsaved are listening, parents are praying for the conversion of their children, fellow speakers care deeply about the souls of those in attendance, and my good friend Geoff Thomas is always there to encourage me.

I have edited this second edition more thoroughly than the first and made a number of changes. Thanks to Ray Lanning, Phyllis Ten Elshof, and Annette Gysen for assisting me in this task. I have also added study questions to coincide with the two other books of my addresses given at the Aber Conference, *Walking with God* (2006) and *Contagious Christian Living* (2009).

Thanks too to Bryntirion Press for allowing Reformation Heritage Books to republish this little book. I pray God this new edition may do as much

for the eternal gain of saints and sinners as I may believe the first printing has done by the sheer grace of the Holy Spirit.

—Joel R. Beeke

## **Introduction: What Is Faith?**

We are often prone to use words without contemplating their meaning. Think of the word *grace*. We all speak of grace, declare that we are saved by grace, and say that our hope is in grace. But do we ever think about what grace means?

I recognized this problem again when I was visiting an aged parishioner in a nursing home. I noticed that in her little room, so much smaller than her former home, she had only one thing hanging on the wall at the side of her bed—a three-by-five index card. My curiosity was aroused, and I said, “What do you have on that card?” She invited me to come around the bed and see.

“What I have on that card is my life,” she said. She had written the word *grace* vertically as an acrostic, and it looked like this:

*God's  
Riches  
At  
Christ's  
Expense*

I am sure that this well-known saying is not the full meaning of grace, but it is a good part of its meaning, and it offers us a refreshing new glimpse of the depths of that glorious word *grace*.

**Faith**

Another word we often use without thinking much about its meaning is *faith*. We know that without faith it is impossible to please God. We know that faith is the core and foundation of daily Christian living. But what is faith?

In 1974 I began my seminary training. One of my teachers wanted to gauge my theological level of knowledge and my writing ability, so he said, “Let me give you an assignment right at the start. You can do it in two pages, perhaps five, no more than ten: What is faith?”

My first thought was that perhaps I should go to the original languages and work on the words used in the Old Testament. The three major Old Testament words for faith mostly mean “to lean on” or “to rest in.” Then I could turn to the New Testament word *pistis*, used over five hundred times for the faith of

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the Christian, and describe what it means to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Or perhaps I could base my work on the definition of faith in the Westminster Shorter Catechism: “Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel.” What a wonderful framework that would be for a definition of faith!

### *Knowledge, Assent, Trust*

Or maybe I could use the classic Reformed definition of faith, which speaks of its exercise in saving knowledge, saving assent, and saving trust. Saving *knowledge* would be a wonderful doctrine to develop. I could explain that you do not just believe with your mind but with all your heart. By faith you taste the goodness of God in Christ (Ps. 34:8), you receive it, and you digest it. It is like the illustration given by Herman Hoeksema of two men contemplating a slice of pizza. One man could not eat it because he had stomach cancer, but he knew all about it. He was a nutritionist and was aware of all the nutrients in it. The other man knew very little about the nutritional aspects of pizza. He could see it had cheese and pepperoni on it, so he took a bite, chewed it, and digested it. “Which man really enjoyed the pizza?” asked Hoeksema. Of course—the man who ate it. Saving knowledge works similarly.

Then comes saving *assent*, or our agreement with God about what He is in all His wondrous majesty as He is revealed in Christ and through the Word of God. I could glorify the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. I could say with Samuel Rutherford, “I know not which divine person I love the most, but this I know, I love each of them and need them all.” Saving faith also agrees with what I am: a bankrupt sinner, poor and needy, who lives by Jesus Christ out of a triune God—the heavenly Father, the redeeming Son, and the sanctifying Spirit.

And then there is saving *trust*, the very heart of faith. That means putting all my confidence in God and trusting in Christ alone for salvation. That would be a wonderful way to describe faith.

### *True and False Faith*

But, I thought, there must be more. Maybe I should look at faith from the Reformed perspective, discerning true faith from false faith by considering the four types of faith. First is historical faith, or believing with the mind. It is outward belief in the Word of God. Second is miraculous faith, which believes that something special is going to be done to me, upon me, or by me. Third is temporary faith, which rejoices in God for a season but is not deeply rooted in Christ and in the Word of God and eventually turns back to the world in the day of persecution. Fourth is saving



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faith, which is strengthened under trial and endures to the end.

### *The Inadequacy of Definitions*

As I tried these ways of describing faith, I began to realize that faith is something far richer than all my theological language. It is as all-embracing as life itself, for faith is the heart of our relationship to God. It is the central characteristic of the regenerate person. We *live* by faith, says the apostle Paul, and that faith flows from the heart. It is the focal point of our spiritual existence, the root from which springs all the God-glorifying activity of the believer's entire being.

No theological language can grasp the depth and breadth and height of this glorious thing we call faith. Faith is the activity of the entire heart expressed throughout life. It is as broad as it is deep; it embraces the weighty matters of personal salvation and the commonplace details of daily living. Without faith, I cannot eat or drink or do what I do to the glory of God. Without faith, I am always sinning, for "without faith it is impossible to please [God]" (Heb. 11:6).

### *Faith's Comprehensiveness*

Faith is inseparable from Christian liberty. It is inseparable from prayer, from peace, from hope, from love, from repentance, and from self-denial. Faith must address the hard questions of life: questions

about affliction, loneliness and despair, cross providences, and numbing trials.

Faith is the heartbeat of evangelism. It is the presupposition to my world-and-life view. Faith encompasses all that I am. Faith leads me to that grand, glorious vision of the glory of God: “For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever” (Rom. 11:36). As a Christian, you must begin by faith, continue in faith, and end with faith. Faith is the heart of your relationship to God. It is the heart of life itself. It is the heart of all theology, especially soteriology.

You cannot have repentance without faith. You cannot believe without repenting. In every act of faith we believingly repent and we penitently believe. Faith and repentance are like two sides of one coin; they belong together. Without faith I cannot break with sin in my heart or understand the law and its demands and its spirituality. I cannot delight to walk in the ways of God. I cannot understand the gospel and justification without faith. I receive these things only by faith.

I cannot be sanctified without faith either. Nothing will work for good in my heart if I do not truly believe in God. And without faith I cannot rejoice in the indwelling Spirit; I cannot feel the seal of that Spirit in my heart for, Paul says, “after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit

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of promise” (Eph. 1:13). And faith is the principle involved in all my truly good works.

Faith works through love (Gal. 5:6) and is inseparable from the efficacy of grace. Grace is never effective apart from faith, yet faith is never in competition with grace. *Sola fide* and *sola gratia* walk hand in hand through the pastures of God’s Word, enabling us to worship, adore, and glorify God. Faith is worked in us by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Word and through celebrating the sacraments. The whole field of systematic theology is a field of faith.

### **Faith in Action**

I spent nearly fifty hours on this assignment before I wrote one sentence, yet everything I had done left me unsatisfied. Somehow it was too abstract. So I began to search the Scriptures asking, how does the Bible describe faith? I first turned to Hebrews 11, the great heroes of faith chapter, and saw how the author describes these people to strengthen Hebrew Christians who were discouraged under persecution. I saw how he offers biblical portraits of faith such as Abel, Enoch, and Abraham, showing one or two dimensions of faith in each and, bit by bit, unfolds the riches of it.

Then I began to think, this is the way! You can best understand faith by seeing how faith operates by the

Spirit in the lives of fallen sinners like us. And when I understood that, I began to make real progress.

In the following four chapters I want to bring you the fruits of my study. I will look at four aspects of faith as they operate in the lives of particular biblical characters. These characters are not included in the hall of faith in Hebrews 11 and so are often overlooked as examples of faith, yet they have much to teach us. I have chosen them carefully, believing they demonstrate aspects of faith that the church of Jesus Christ sorely needs today.

As we look at these people, ask yourself three questions. First, do I have saving faith? Second, am I exercising the particular aspect of faith evident in this biblical person? Third, and most important, how can this particular dimension of faith mature me in the most holy faith?

I pray God that the Holy Spirit will richly bless these words so that you may grow as a child of God in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. If you are not saved, I pray that you will realize the emptiness of life without saving faith and come to see that glorious life is possible only through faith in Christ.

### **A Big God—A Large Life**

If you are not yet a follower of Christ, Satan comes to you and says, “Don’t be a Christian! If you become

a Christian, your life will be restricted; you'll be in a small world." But the opposite is true.

When I came to the end of my enlistment in the United States Army, a sergeant said to me, "I hope, Son, when you go back out into that big world, you make it out there."

I asked, "Why do you say that to me?"

"Because it's a big world," he said. "I'm in the army, and I serve Uncle Sam. My world is only so large, but because I serve the government, I've got security. But out there in that world all by yourself, you won't have security."

"Sir, I serve a bigger being than Uncle Sam," I said. "My God is the God of the universe, and I trust that He will take care of me."

As a Christian, you do not just serve yourself. If you are not a Christian, you have nothing bigger in your world than yourself, and you are only a speck of dust. Have you ever looked down from an airplane and thought that every little human being scurrying about in those little cars below is like a speck of dust? But God is the God of the universe—the God who has made billions upon billions of stars and galaxies. And the Christian can say, "This God is *my* God! My world is so much bigger because my God has promised that all things shall work together for good to me, that I may live to His glory through faith."

Faith is the instrument by which I am united through Christ with the great God of the universe.

Faith gives my life breadth and depth and height and meaning. If you are unsaved, your life is small and restricted; but if you are a believer, your life is large because you belong to a big God.

A little boy, eight years old, was dying. His father asked him, “Son, aren’t you afraid to die?”

“No, Dad,” the boy said. “You see, when George Whitefield came to town and I heard him preach, I heard about his big God, and ever since I’ve wanted to be with Whitefield’s big God.”

We have a big God not only in this life but also in the life to come. Faith has a big God, and that is what gives the Christian long-term security. The Christian has a life-death-eternity comfort: it is *one* comfort, and it is good for this life, in death, and for eternity—it is good for every situation forever and ever. In assuring us that Jesus is our only comfort in life and in death, the Heidelberg Catechism says so beautifully: “I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ; who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins.” This faithful Savior who died for me now sits at the right hand of the Father to live for me and to be Lord over my life so that He may prepare me to be with Him where He is. In these four studies, then, we shall be looking at this big God through the lens of faith, asking ourselves how this faith is operating in our lives.