

Bible Studies for Adventists



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April 4–10, 2009

Commentary on “Faith”

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Day 1: Sabbath Afternoon, April 4, 2009

The introduction here is well-stated; however, it leaves room for some false assumptions by what it does not state: that Christian faith is first and foremost belief in Jesus Christ as He is described in the gospel given to us by the apostles. The Seventh-day Adventist church and many other churches add to scripture (Ellen White is presented as a "continuing and authoritative source of truth", a title that only belongs to the Bible), and any addition to scripture is necessarily a subtraction from the purity of the gospel. Jude, the brother of James the apostle, writes in his letter:

Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints. For certain persons have crept in unnoticed... (Jude 1:3)

Jude speaks of a faith which was handed down to the saints once for all. That means that the canon of scripture is closed after the apostles have died. There will never be a "present truth" that was not given at first. Therefore, any prophecy, word of instruction, or teaching that is given to the church is for the purpose of strengthening and building up the church by directing them to the timeless truths that have already been given, and not by introducing new truths. In fact, Jude goes on to warn about "certain persons" who have "crept in unnoticed", who will introduce new teachings that have the effect of polluting the gospel and dividing the church.

Standing firm in our faith means holding on to the pure gospel and defending it earnestly. Holding to the gospel does not mean summarily rejecting modern prophets and teachers; but when Paul writes, "Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances" (1 Thessalonians 5:19-20), he immediately adds, "But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Faith that is rooted in a false gospel is not true faith. A false gospel is any addition to or subtraction from the "faith which was once for all handed down to the saints" by the apostles, which we receive as the Bible. Let us keep this in mind as we study the topic of faith this week -- that the term "faith" as we use it refers only to a belief in Jesus Christ as presented in the gospel given to us by the apostles. Paul summarizes the apostolic gospel:

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time... (1 Corinthians 15:1-6)

Paul further explains the true gospel in Romans 3:

But now apart from law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. (Romans 3:21-25)

Let's make some observations:

- The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law -- this refers to any external requirements
- This righteousness is witnessed to by the Law and the Prophets (they testify to it)
- This righteousness is granted through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe
- In the giving of righteousness to those who believe, no distinction is made; rather,
- All who believe have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (we're all in the same plight before God), and
- All who believe are justified as a gift by His grace
- This justification comes through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, the propitiation (sacrifice of atonement) in his blood
- This justification is applied through faith

The gospel is that Jesus paid it all, and there are no more requirements for salvation (or even for everyday life) than to believe in Him. As Jesus states in the gospel of John, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent" (John 6:29). Faith means believing and trusting in our God, and especially the Lord Jesus and all he is to us -- our savior, Lord, friend, constant companion, our intercessor who prays for us, our high priest who represents us to the Father, our helper in time of need, our provider, our true Sabbath rest, and the one for whom we eagerly wait to be with Him. It is no wonder that Paul writes, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."

What about you? Is Jesus everything to you? Is your delight and joy and trust in Him so great that you can say "to me, to live is Christ"? Is any extra-Biblical teaching holding you in slavery to fear? Are you trusting in something or someone other than Jesus to provide for all your needs? Having faith like a child means living a very simple life of trusting in Jesus for everything, even to the smallest details of life -- this life is full of joy and peace in Him. Ask Him to lead you to Himself, to show you what you need to surrender to Him. He loves you (he already died for you), and promises that "those who trust in Him will never be put to shame."

May the Holy Spirit guide us into all truth as we continue in Jesus' word, as He has said: "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32).

Summary

1. Christian faith is rooted in the true gospel given to us by the apostles. Any additions to or subtractions from the canon or teachings of the Bible make it a false gospel and a false faith.
2. The true gospel is that Jesus paid for our sins in his death, and our only requirement for salvation and for daily life is to believe in Him.
3. Faith like a child is a very simple life of trusting Jesus for everything.

Day 2: Sunday, April 5, 2009

The author has made no mention of the necessity of the new birth. Understanding the new birth is essential to understanding the gift of faith. It is beyond the scope of this commentary to fully discuss the topic of the new birth (several Proclamation articles treat the subject here: <http://www.lifeassuranceministries.org/proclamationlist.html#New%20Birth>).

Faith is truly a gift from God, but there needs to be a differentiation between saving faith and the process of growing in faith following the point at which we are saved. See yesterday's study for a discussion on saving faith -- this is the point at which we are born again and receive the Holy Spirit.

All of salvation is by faith: justification (the point of being saved and declared righteous before God), sanctification (the process of continuing to grow in faith), and glorification (when faith becomes sight and we are made perfect). When Paul writes: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8), he is referring to all three parts of salvation -- all three are by faith. In Romans, he writes:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, "But the righteous man shall live by faith" (Romans 1:16-17).

The phrase "from faith to faith" means that living a righteous life begins and continues based on one thing: faith in God. As the scripture says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Abraham believed God at the beginning, and he kept on believing in God, as he demonstrated later by obeying God's command to sacrifice his son Isaac. Faith alone is the way of righteousness, as the scripture says: "But the righteous man shall live by faith."

Some believers are given a special spiritual gift of faith for the benefit of the church, as Paul writes: "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of

wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit..." (1 Corinthians 12:7-9a).

The author poses a question near the end: "How can we position ourselves in a way that prepares us for the gift of faith? That is, what changes can we make in our lives to make us more receptive to that gift?" This question is misleading. Faith is not something we receive by any sort of personal effort in self-transformation, as the question seems to assume. Rather, both saving faith and sanctifying faith come through the word of God. As Paul writes, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). Jesus also says, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32).

So to receive the gift of faith, the best thing to do is to ask the Holy Spirit to teach us, and then listen to His word, the Bible, and submit ourselves to it.

Summary

1. Understanding the new birth is essential to understanding saving faith.
2. There are three parts to salvation: justification (when we are declared righteous and inducted into God's family), sanctification (the ongoing process of growing in faith and being set apart to God), and glorification (when we receive our new bodies and faith becomes sight)
3. All three parts of salvation are by faith
4. Saving faith and subsequent growth in faith are both a gift, and there is also a spiritual gift of faith that is given to some for the strengthening of the church
5. To receive the gift of faith and grow in faith, God has given the means of hearing His word and submitting ourselves to it.

Day 3: Monday, April 6, 2009

I have a couple of thoughts to add to what the writer says in today's lesson. He is right in saying that exactly how God imparts saving faith is a mystery. However, Scripture has given us clues -- clues that point to "Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2), so that he alone gets the credit and the glory.

First, the New Testament is clear that God chooses those whom He will call:

- Jesus says, "You did not choose me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit..." (John 15:16)
- Who will bring any charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies... (Romans 8:33)
- ... there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. (Romans 11:5).
- ... He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him (Ephesians 1:3-5).

Second, God alone enables us to come to Jesus in faith. Jesus said to his disciples, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:44). Earlier he remarks, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out" (John 6:37).

Scripture in the Life of the Believer

Regarding the role of the Scriptures in the life of the believer, I keep on coming back to John 8:31, where Jesus says, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine." One wonderful example of continuing in and submitting to Jesus' word is Mary Magdalene, who sat at the feet of Jesus and listened. When Martha (who was busy, worried, and upset) objected, Jesus said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (John 10:41-42). Not that Jesus condones laziness (Paul instructs the church: "Whoever will not work shall not eat"); rather, the life of faith is simply listening to Jesus and submitting to His word -- no trying to handle things on our own strength.

Practical Righteousness by Faith

The author mentions James 2:18-19. Seventh-day Adventists often try to use James' statements to justify a doctrine of righteousness or perfection being attained by works or external effort. The statement "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:24) seems to condone a justification by external actions, which would contradict Paul's teaching that "to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Romans 4:5). As Gary Inrig says, Paul and James are standing back to back, fighting for the same truth and against different heresies. Paul is addressing folks who rely on works for salvation (rather than trusting God),

and James is addressing folks whose actions prove they don't have faith in the first place. "Belief determines behavior," as the adage goes, and faith in Jesus indeed has the effect of transforming our lives.

James gives the example of Abraham offering up his son Isaac in obedience to God. Abraham was not attempting to perfect himself by a law of works when he sacrificed his son Isaac; rather, he was simply trusting and obeying God. Rahab, James' other example, also demonstrated a belief in and a fear of the true God when she hid the spies from Israel, rather than an attempt to measure up to some external legalistic standard. Both James and Paul are condoning simple faith in God, which will be displayed in our behavior as a trust in God and an obedience to Him, and not to some external code of behavior, as Paul says: "by observing the law no one will be justified" (Galatians 2:16).

If God convicts you of ways you fall short in faith or obedience, your focus of effort should not be toward changing yourself by your own strength. Rather, listen to Jesus' word and abide in Him. He has said that "apart from Me you can do nothing." Conversely, "he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit" (John 15:5). And life in Jesus is not burdensome. He says

Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30).

Summary

1. God has chosen those who are His.
2. God alone enables people to come to Jesus.
3. Continuing in Jesus' Word is the mark of a true disciple; the life of faith is listening to Jesus and submitting to His Word.
4. James' teachings are not opposed to Paul's; both of them teach a righteousness by faith which has the effect of transforming the lives of those who trust in Jesus.
5. If we see a lack of faith or obedience in our lives, our focus of effort should be toward growing our faith through coming to Jesus and listening to Him speak through Scripture, rather than attempting to change ourselves by our own strength.

Day 4: Tuesday, April 7, 2009

When we think about exercising faith, there can be a tendency to think of our faith as the cause and God's work as the effect -- as if we can influence God into doing something for us that He wouldn't otherwise do if we didn't have the faith.

There is a subtle error in this approach. I have three thoughts to share regarding Biblical exercise of faith.

First, God's promises to us who are saved are true whether we believe them or not. The early Christian saying went (as recorded by Paul), "If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself" (2 Timothy 2:13). We who are saved are part of God's covenant people, and His promises to us cannot be revoked. If you are saved, you are "in Christ" and an heir of God's promises. Here are some promises in Scripture that are for those who are in Christ, whether they trust in them at a particular time or not:

"He Himself has said, 'I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you'" (Hebrews 13:5).

"For you have made the LORD, my refuge, even the Most High, your dwelling place. No evil will befall you, nor will any plague come near your tent. For He will give His angels charge concerning you, to guard you in all your ways" (Psalm 91:9-11).

"But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one" (2 Thessalonians 3:3).

God is good and will take care of us. If we trust in Him and His perfect love for us, then we can be free from fear.

Second, our faith in God is what really matters, not whether a particular circumstance turns out in a particular way. John the apostle writes,

For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world--our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (1 John 5:4)

Trusting and believing in Jesus Christ and knowing Him has the powerful effect of removing fear and worry -- and he changes our attitude to "Your kingdom come, Your will be done." His kingdom, His glory, and His will are what really matter ultimately, and in His eternal purposes He also will not fail to work for our ultimate good.

Third, as James the apostle writes, "You do not have, because you do not ask God." (James 4:2). In the life of faith, there is definitely room for asking God for things -- it is only natural for children to ask their Father for what they need and want. The requests that honor God come from already trusting in Him to ultimately provide for our needs, and they are in submission to His will. 1 John promises that if we ask according to God's will, He will give us what we ask. But

James warns us, "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures" (James 4:3). God cares about loving us and granting our hearts' desires, but it is so much more important that our hearts are right before Him. Thus, the Psalmist writes, "Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart" -- namely, that His will be done and that He be glorified in our lives.

May God give us humble hearts as we approach the throne of grace: submitting to His will, trusting in His perfect care, and humbly asking for what our hearts desire.

Summary

1. God's promises are true whether we believe them or not. If we are part of His covenant people (having received eternal life through faith in Jesus), He is our Father and nothing can separate us from His love.
2. Our faith in God is what overcomes the world -- so our faith (trusting that God is in control and that He is with us and taking care of us) matters more than whether a particular circumstance turns out in a particular way.
3. Asking God is a normal part of being a child of God. It is an act of faith, and thus pleasing to God, if it is done in an attitude of humble trust and submission to Him.

Day 5: Wednesday, April 8, 2009

Better promises

The author is very right when he writes: "Faith is more than a feeling... faith is doing what we know God asks us to do even though we don't feel like doing it." I'd like to address the root of the kind of faith that gives us the power to obey even when we don't feel like it.

One important aspect of growing in faith that is sometimes overlooked is having a love for truth and living in reality. In the face of tough circumstances, personal difficulties, or sinful desires, it can be very tempting to "pretend" -- to deliberately deceive ourselves -- in order to temporarily escape pain, quell our conscience, or otherwise deaden unpleasant feelings. Sin especially makes false, but enticing, promises, and tempts us away from the light of truth and honesty.

The kingdom of God, however, is founded in light and truth, and it is founded on better promises, promises that are true and that lead to "pleasures forever", as David writes: "You will make known to me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; in your right hand there are pleasures forever" (Psalm 16:11). Isaiah calls, "Come, house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord" (Isaiah 2:5). Jesus said, "I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness" (John 12:46). God's word, and especially His promises to us, are the key to breaking out of self-deception and having the power to follow Jesus into the light. I have mentioned John 8:31-32 in every commentary this week so far, and I'll include it again (Jesus speaking): "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Another passage that speaks to the powerful effect of God's promises is 2 Peter 1:2-4:

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.

Isn't it wonderful that God's power has already granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness? -- and it's all through the knowledge of Him, and through his promises to us.

What are some examples of "precious and magnificent promises" that free us from sin by giving us the power to act in faith? I'll list just a few examples that are helpful to some areas of weakness for me.

Worry/anxiety:

- "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:5-7).
- "My God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:18-20).
- "... for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:32-33).

Worry about the future:

- "And in Your book were all written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them" (Psalm 139:16).

- "[Jesus Christ] will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."
- "I [Jesus] am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Sexual temptation:

- "Therefore, if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory. Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity..." (Colossians 3:1-5).

Legalism/perfectionism:

- "He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach-- if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast..." (Colossians 1:22-23).
- "But to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Romans 4:5).
- "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6).
- "My [Jesus] grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Dwelling on past sins:

- "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).
- "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

When we give our lives to Jesus, He doesn't leave us in our sin. Rather, he leads us to live in truth and by faith in the truth. He is the God of truth. David says in one of his Psalms of repentance: "Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom" (Psalm 51:6). In another Psalm, he cries out, "Teach me Your way, O Lord; I will walk in Your truth; Unite my heart to fear Your name" (Psalm 86:11). This is the heart-cry of a child of God: knowing our own darkness and sin, we need and long for our hearts to be undivided in simple devotion to and trust in Jesus.

Condition for growth: humble surrender

Towards the end, the author makes the statement: "by our personal choices we can help create the right kind of environment in which spiritual growth can take place." There is really only one heart attitude and one choice that can effect true spiritual growth in your life, and that is to humbly surrender of all of yourself to God. Surrender means giving up your right to yourself. When you have done that, there is true freedom.

What is Jesus asking you to surrender? Lay yourself down at His feet. It may be incredibly painful to give up things you hold dear, but He will lift you up, and He will give you joy in His presence. "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:6-7).

May the Lord direct our hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ. (2 Thessalonians 3:5)

Summary

1. God's promises to us enable us, very practically, to live by faith in Him and be freed from the power of sins
2. Humble surrender (giving up your right to yourself) is the only heart attitude and choice that can effect true spiritual growth.

Day 6: Thursday, April 9, 2009

Church membership

Today's lesson touches on the tension some Seventh-day Adventists may feel between having faith in the doctrines of Adventism and having faith in Jesus. Indeed, Adventism places strong emphasis on church membership and on believing and obeying the core teachings of the SDA church. Because of this, many people feel a tension between the role of the church and the role of Jesus in their lives -- namely, which comes first?

If there is ever a question of what should have first place in our lives, the answer is Jesus alone. There can only be one first place, as Jesus says:

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth (Matthew 6:24).

The statement holds true for other things as well. We cannot serve both God and something else -- be it church, family, doctrines, job, or money. The only way to be truly serving God in all the areas of our lives is to surrender our lives to Jesus, including every individual thing in our lives. Jesus calls us--all those who would follow Jesus, those from any religious background--to surrender our church and group membership to Him. Jesus calls us to a pure devotion to Him alone and nothing else -- everything else must go, including church and its teachings (and I'm speaking of my own church as well). We are called first, and only, to a relationship with Jesus based on faith alone in Him, and that means letting all else go.

Jesus speaks of leaving all else behind:

He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me (Matthew 10:37-38).

Doctrines

The author is right when he says, "sound doctrine is essential, but doctrine and theology that remain lifeless theory can save no one. One can be a theologian without being a believer." Paul admonishes Timothy:

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

To have correct doctrine, we must have a correct Biblical hermeneutic. This means following what Scripture says about itself as we interpret it. Hebrews 1 says:

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world (Hebrews 1:1-2).

This particular passage establishes that God has spoken to us once and for all through Jesus, and this final revelation is more important than any other. It gives us a good start in establishing priorities so that we may "rightly divide the Word of truth". The Bible itself acknowledges that different scriptures are to be treated differently.

The most important aspect of establishing good, Biblically derived doctrines is to follow Scripture's lead in majoring on certain things and minoring on other things. Some major things are: that Jesus is the Son of God and is God; that he died for our sins and was raised on the third day; that we can know we are saved if we trust in Him alone to save us from hell.

The majority of Christians agree that we don't cut off fellowship with other believers over relatively minor differences in belief, such as when Jesus will come (pre-, mid-, or post-tribulation), whether baptism must be by immersion, or the details of how the Lord's Supper should be celebrated. To be sure, these issues are important, and each of us should study diligently and seek the Holy Spirit's help to know the truth; but if another believer differs in opinion over these things, that should not be reason enough to break fellowship with them or look down on them. These are minor issues because the Bible places less emphasis on them.

Summary

1. All things in our lives other than Jesus need to be surrendered to His lordship.
 2. In building our doctrines (our understanding of truth), we need to have a solid method of interpreting the Bible that follows what the Bible says about how it is to be interpreted.
 3. There are major issues and minor issues in doctrine--again, these are to be established by following the Bible's lead of emphasis
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Day 7: Friday, April 10, 2009

Grace and the Centrality of Christ

How excellent to end a study on faith with an exhortation to "grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." As Paul wrote (and we began the week with this quote), "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" (Ephesians 2:7-9). We are saved by God's grace, given to us through Jesus, and we are called to grow and be strengthened in that grace. The author of Hebrews writes:

Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings; for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, through which those who were so occupied were not benefited. We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat (Hebrews 13:9-11).

The writer's main point is that "it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace." Grace is the infinitely abundant, constantly flowing, freely given, completely undeserved and unearned favor of God in all things and at all times for those who trust in Him and believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ. As we grow in the knowledge of God, we will be further enabled to trust in God's grace.

The writer counsels us not to be carried away by varied and strange teachings -- this means any vein of teaching that detracts or distracts from the grace of God in Jesus. A teaching is "varied and strange", and therefore to be avoided, if its root is in something other than Jesus. One example given in this passage of a varied and strange teaching is "foods." In context the writer is referring to the practice of food-related traditions in Judaism, and especially teachings that various dietary and eating rituals carried spiritual significance and spiritually benefited those who practiced them. Vegetarianism, dieting, and fasting are some examples of modern-day food practices that people often do for the sake of spiritual benefit. Paul clarifies what the real issue is with these things when he writes:

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ (Colossians 2:8). The question to ask about any teaching or practice is whether it is rooted in the tradition of men and the elementary principles of this world, or whether it is rooted in Christ. In other words, are you looking to this teaching or practice to benefit you spiritually, or are you trusting Jesus alone for all your spiritual benefit?

To eat vegetarian, or diet, or fast, is not a sin per se, as Paul writes (and he includes Sabbath keeping here as well):

One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord (Romans 14:5-8).

In another place, Paul writes:

Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day--things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ (Colossians 2:16-17).

Jesus alone is the substance, the reality, the full and final revelation of the character of God, and the source of grace and truth. John writes:

For of His [the Word's, Jesus'] fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him (John 1:16-18).

As opposed to the Law given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ; furthermore, Jesus, not the Law or any strange teachings, is the full revelation of the invisible God to us. Therefore, as God the Father spoke out of the cloud over Jesus, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased; listen to Him!" (Matthew 17:5). Let us listen to Jesus and avoid strange teachings. Truth, grace, and eternal life are found in Him alone.

Comments on the discussion questions

1. The encouragement we can draw from these great men and women of faith is that righteousness before God, and even being listed among those whose lives brought glory to God, is not achieved by conformance to an external moral standard; righteousness is given to those who have faith in Jesus Christ, regardless of the sins they have committed.
2. The important thing, whether we are in a crisis of faith or not, is to love the truth and desire to live according to it. Some applicable promises are:
 - "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matthew 5:5-7).

- "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32).

- "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13).

We can trust God and His word and the Holy Spirit to lead us to the truth. Ask Him: "Father, thank you for the truth of your Word, and thank you for the help of the Holy Spirit. Please guide me into all truth. Help me to know what is real. Give me wisdom. I need your help. I submit myself to You and to Your word, and I trust you to take care of me." -- something like that. Remember, He always gives grace to the humble.

3. The truth, the reality of all things, can stand up to all challenges. Our faith is based on solid reality (for example, there are myriads of proof for the authenticity of scripture, for the resurrection, etc.). Apologetics resources exist to help people with intellectual challenges to their faith, and even better, God has promised to give wisdom to those who ask and who seek it. But we must be willing to submit ourselves to the truth when He reveals it.
4. The statement "you need faith to believe in what you can't prove" could be misleading -- it could seem to imply to someone that we can prove some things completely. But in reality, we can't prove anything completely: there will always be assumptions upon which other things are built. For example, most of us assume without requiring proof that what we see with our eyes does exist. Such beliefs can be supported by other evidence, but there is no level of evidence that can force someone to believe.

We must submit ourselves and obey what we know is true. Knowledge of truth comes by obedience, not by reasoning. Oswald Chambers writes that we learn more in five minutes of obedience than a year of reasoning. Jesus said:

If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own (John 7:17).

May God guide you into all truth as you listen to Jesus and obey His word. His yoke, not the law, but the grace and truth of God, is easy; His burden is light.

Summary

1. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by strange teachings -- anything that detracts or distracts from the centrality of Christ.
2. Grace and truth come through Jesus Christ, not the Law, and not through empty, external actions and practices
3. Righteousness before God is by faith alone -- this is the greatest encouragement of Hebrews 11
4. In crises of faith, the truth is precious. Ask God to lead you to the truth, and humbly submit yourself to Him.
5. All realization of truth comes by obedience, not by reason. Listen to Jesus and obey, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.