

Chapter 4

Faith in God and the Priority of Jesus Christ

Tom Wells, *The Priority of Jesus Christ*

Quote of the Week:

Certainly there is no misunderstanding the insistence of Jesus in the gospels when he demands of his disciples a faith which must accept not only what he says, but also himself as speaker. We can easily check that none of the ancient prophets proceeded to this length.¹

Key Scripture:

Many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name. (John 20:30-31, NASB).

Lesson Outline:

I. Faith in God was required in the Old Testament.

- A. Abraham in Gen. 15:6—“While Hebrew words that describe faith, belief, and trust are not plentiful in the earlier books of the Old Testament, the narratives make it evident that faith in God was a prime quality in the lives of its heroes” (41).
- B. Hebrews 11—God commends the faith of men and women from every age (v. 2).
- C. As we go further in the OT, references to personal faith increase. Artur Weiser argues that “Older OT religion was collective in structure, and it was difficult to give expression to the inner life of the community. Thus a wealth of usage begins to appear only when the individual breaks free from the collective bond, and on the basis of his own experience devotes special attention to the attitude of man to God” (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*; quoted p. 42).
 1. The psalms often speak of personal trust in Yahweh—sometimes as a command (4:5, 37:3, 62:8), but more often in terms of the psalmists’ experience (11:1, 16:1).
 2. Isaiah 12:1-3
 3. Lamentations 3:22-26

II. “The New Testament continues the call to trust in God” (44).

- A. Mars Hill (Acts 17:24-27)—Paul describes, not an indifferent, impersonal “unmoved mover,” but a God without needs who “enjoys the prospect of many seeking him in faith and hope” (44-45).
- B. “The God of the New Testament is the God of the Old Testament in every way. The right response to him always is faith, confidence, and trust” (45).

¹ H. M. Féret, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1958), 43; quoted in Tom Wells, *The Priority of Jesus Christ* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2005), 51. Unless otherwise specified, all quotes are from *The Priority of Jesus Christ*.

- III. “The New Testament, however, develops another theme alongside confidence in God, that of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ” (45).
- A. At first, that may not seem surprising.
 - 1. We know and trust many other people in our lives, and we are expected or invited to do so.
 - 2. As Christians we’re so familiar with Christ’s demands for faith in himself that we forget that there is no biblical parallel for them.
 - B. Nowhere in the Bible do we see a man or woman repeatedly requiring others to place faith in himself or herself as a matter of obedience to God—except for Jesus (John 6:29, 8:24).
 - C. In the OT, faith in God largely entails faith in His word (for example, Gen. 15:6). “When we come to the Gospel of John, we learn that the Lord Jesus is what God says today” (46)—*He* is God’s Word (John 1:1, 1:14; see also 1:18).
 - D. Because all that Jesus does and says comes from the Father, “faith in the Lord Jesus is faith in God” (46).
 - 1. Again, he is the last and highest word from God (Heb. 1:1-2).
 - 2. “To believe in Jesus, then, brings with it ‘the right to become children of God’” (47, citing John 1:12, 3:15-16, 3:18-20, 3:36).
 - 3. The Father, too, is speaking and working [John 5:17], but the explicit call is to believe Jesus. “In fact, men may measure their own supposed faith in the God who lies behind the Lord Jesus solely by their dealings with Jesus” (47, citing John 5:45-47); there is no genuine faith in God apart from faith in Christ.
 - E. Jesus makes his hearers’ “understanding of truth, and their consequent moral freedom, depend on their being his disciples” (48, citing John 8:31-32, 36). “No mere mortal could seriously say such things, but once uttered, men must reject them as lunacy or cast themselves in confidence on the one who said them... There is no middle ground” (48).
 - F. Eternal life depends on obedient faith in the Lord Jesus.
 - 1. He is the eternal one who shares his immortality (John 8:51, 58).
 - 2. He is the shepherd who leads his flock to life (John 10:9-10).
 - 3. He is the Resurrection and the life (John 11:25-27).
 - G. Faith in Jesus glorifies the Father, as seen in the raising of Lazarus.
 - 1. Martha’s confession of faith glorifies Christ (John 11:25-27).
 - 2. This glorifies God (11:4) as many see Lazarus raised and put faith in Jesus (v. 45).
 - H. John says that the goal of all he wrote was to lead to faith in Jesus Christ (John 20:30-31).
 - 1. Jesus’s call to follow him is also a call to faith.
 - 2. Royce Gruenler: “The empirical evidence of the Gospels is that people followed Jesus, not a challenge or proclamation. They gathered in table-fellowship with *him*, followed *his* bidding, and proclaimed his message in response to *him*” (quoted 51).

IV. Paul likewise demands faith in the Lord Jesus.

- A. John uses the verb “believe” rather than the noun “faith;” Paul uses both freely.
- B. Romans: “Paul describes ‘a righteousness that is by faith’ (1:17); this becomes one of the great themes of the book. This righteousness ‘comes through faith in Jesus Christ’ (3:22). It comes from God, who is ‘the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus (3:26). This faith is not inferior to faith in God, but is of the same type, as Paul shows by using Abraham’s faith as its prototype (4:3, 5, 11-12, etc.)” (51-52).
- C. Jesus is the stumbling stone, but also the Cornerstone that will never fail those who trust him (Rom. 9:30-33, 10:11)—every person’s response will bring either falling or unashamed trust.
- D. Galatians: Paul’s argument against table-separation between Jews and Gentiles is centered on a shared faith in Christ (Gal. 2:15-16).
- E. Living by faith in the Son of God (Gal. 2:20) is equated with living “for God” (2:19).
- F. Galatians 3: As in Rom. 4, Paul “treats faith in Christ as comparable to faith in God” (53). Having pointed to Christ as the object of faith [2:20-3:1], he cites Abraham’s faith as its OT equivalent, again quoting Gen. 15:6 (Gal. 3:6-9). The OT promises come to pass only by faith in Jesus (3:22), as we become “sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (3:26).

V. Faith in Christ does not *replace* faith in the Father.

- A. “Despite the constant demand for faith in Jesus, God the Father remains the object of our prayers” (53).
 - 1. It’s not wrong to pray to Jesus (John 14:14, Acts 7:59-60, 1 Cor. 16:22).
 - 2. But the overall pattern in the NT is prayer to the Father—and “the inclination to cry to the Father is one evidence that we belong to Jesus Christ” (54, citing Rom. 8:15b, Gal. 4:6)!
- B. “The goal of Christian life is godliness or godlikeness. God demands of us, and works in us, conformity to his own image” (54, citing 1 Pet. 1:15-16, Matt. 5:48).
- C. “Where, then, shall we concentrate our faith? Shall we believe in the Father or shall we believe in the Son” (55)?
 - 1. “Trust in God; trust also in me” (John 14:1).
 - 2. “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).
- D. There is no competition between Father and Son—but there is a priority in coming to the Son, because it is in trusting the Son that we know and trust the Father.
 - 1. “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31).
 - 2. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).