

MYTH *10*

Perseverance Required



HOLD FAST

*Then he [Abram] **believed** in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.*

Genesis 15:6

*By **faith** Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, “In Isaac your descendents shall be called.” He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead.*

Hebrews 11:17-19

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Are you an early riser? If so, perhaps you have gotten up just at daybreak and looked out the back window of your home. In the hazy light of dawn, you see an object that appears to be some kind of animal. You watch intently, even squinting your eyes for a clearer view. As the sun begins to come up, the object becomes clear. There is no animal at all. It was just a shadow from the branches of a shrub. In the sunlight, everything is clear, and it was not at all as it appeared just minutes before.

How we view things can change. Our understanding can change when something is seen from the proper perspective. So it is with faith. Gaining the right perspective of faith is critical, since we come to Christ in faith, and we live the Christian life by faith. So, how should we understand biblical faith?

One Perspective

John MacArthur provides one perspective of faith, when He writes, “As a *divine gift*, faith is *neither transient nor impotent*. It

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has an *abiding quality* that guarantees its *endurance to the end*....
The *faith God gives can never evaporate*.”¹

Faith’s characteristics, as seen by MacArthur, are as follows:

- The *source* of faith—“divine gift” and “God-given”
- The *power* of faith—“not impotent”
- The *perseverance* of faith—“not transient,” “an abiding quality,” guaranteed “endurance to the end,” and “can never evaporate”

Let’s use MacArthur’s definition to determine if we are seeing shadows or the real thing in the light of God’s Word.

Source of Faith

The source of faith can be understood from two different perspectives.

MacArthur’s Perspective

The first characteristic of faith MacArthur cites—*the source*—relates to the divine gift of faith at initial salvation. In Ephesians 2:8, faith at initial salvation is addressed. “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.” As has already been discussed, God alone is the cause of initial salvation.² Much debate centers on what “the gift of God” in Ephesians 2:8 refers to. Obviously God convicts (John 16:8) and draws (John 6:44) those whom He will save. The point is whether (1) He also gives the faith to believe or (2) He moves a person to a place where he embraces Jesus in faith for eternal life.³ In other words, is saving faith a *divine gift* or a *persuasion*? The distinction may seem insignificant, but it is extremely important, particularly from MacArthur’s Reformed theology stance.

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The Reformed view understands the source of faith to begin with God's gift of faith at conversion and then that divine gift continues to grow and expand throughout the Christian life. As Keith Mathison explains, "Faith is not a one-time event. It is not like signing a contract or an insurance policy. True living faith is a gift of God that begins at a person's birth and never ends...true living faith begins at a moment in time and then continues."⁴ Some liken this concept of faith to a seed, or an acorn, which grows into a substantial oak tree. John Piper envisions this perspective, when he writes, "The extension of this faith [justifying faith] into the future is, as it were, contained in the first seed of faith, as the oak in the acorn."⁵

The conclusion from this imagery is that saving faith, given by God, continually expands, increasing in size.

A Better Perspective

A construction program provides a better analogy. After the laying of the first cornerstone, a building grows as each block is stacked, one on another. This is the picture of first coming to faith and then walking by faith. In a moment in time, initial salvation occurs as man believes in Christ for eternal life and God regenerates him. Occurring simultaneously, one is declared righteous and possesses eternal life. Faith in that figurative-cornerstone moment is saving and need never be repeated. It has been laid and the construction program now proceeds. Every time a believer relies on God, trusting the Word of God for his next step, another block is added. Faith is cumulative—increasing and growing with each successive step.

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Saving faith in Jesus is relying on the ability of God to save you and give you life. The faith walk that follows is based on an ever-increasing trust in God and in His Word. James explains in James 1:2-4, “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various *trials* [testings], knowing that the testing [proving] of your *faith* produces *endurance*. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect [*mature*] and complete, lacking in nothing” (italics added). Responding properly in every circumstance is a choice. Each good decision based on faith in God amidst any test, results in further growth of the believer’s faith. No matter what the situation, the believer is to embrace the fact that God has his best interests in view. As the caliber of faith is revealed in test after test,

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the accumulation of quality-proven faith produces God’s intended result—*that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing*.

Saving faith does not mushroom. Faith does not change! Faith cannot change! Faith is simply trust—a realization that something is true. The biblical pattern for growth is faith, on faith, resulting in an accrual of both the saving faith and all subsequent steps of faith. This collective process brings ever-increased faithfulness to Christ.

Power of Faith

The real question is, Why does something grow? As before, there are two perspectives regarding the power of faith.

MacArthur’s Perspective

The second characteristic of faith MacArthur cites—*power*—concerns faith as an instrumental force at conversion and in the

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believer's life. Taking the Reformed theology view of a multifaceted faith that works, saving faith is the cause of obedience in an individual not only at conversion (i.e., surrender and repentance), but also continually in daily living. MacArthur and John Piper teach us that faith actually produces obedience.⁶ Certainly MacArthur expects a positive answer when asking, "Thus the test of true faith is this: *does it produce obedience?*"⁷ For those holding the Reformed view, faith is active. Since God is the energizing source of faith, He is the One who produces obedience in the life of the believer.

If saving faith incorporates God-energized-works continuously in and through the believer, the responsibility of the believer must be addressed. In light of the numerous biblical directives for believers to walk in obedience, would not those

directives be meaningless if God actually is doing the work? Is God then commanding Himself to obey? As a result, the idea of a ballooning faith can be represented by an elevator ride, with God's works providing continued lift.

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A Better Perspective

On the other hand saving faith is simple trust in Christ and His promise of life. Following conversion, the Christian walk is based on reliance in, or believing, the trustworthiness of God. As previously discussed in earlier myths, faith is passive.⁸ Faith is not the cause of salvation; it does not produce salvation.⁹ In fact faith does not cause obedience in the Christian life. Rather, daily the individual choices made by a believer, based on faith, produce either obedience or disobedience. This step-by-step understanding of faith conforms to the biblical approach of growth taught in James 1:2-4 and likened to a stairway, climbed by one step of faith after another.

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Perseverance of Faith

The perseverance of faith, likewise, can be understood from two different perspectives.

MacArthur's Perspective

MacArthur's third characteristic of faith—*perseverance*—concerns the abiding quality of faith. Concurring with MacArthur, John Piper states that the faith that initially justifies, declaring us righteous before God, “is a persevering, that is *continuing, kind of faith*.”¹⁰ In supporting “persevering faith,” he directs our attention to three passages, saying, “Note that these next three texts represent three *successive* settings in Abraham's life in which his (persevering) faith is said to be reckoned as righteousness.”¹¹ Piper uses three historically *consecutive* texts that address Abraham's faith:

1. Abraham's initial faith in Genesis 15:6 (see Rom. 4:3)
2. Abraham's faith in God's promise to provide a seed despite Sarah's barren womb in Genesis 17:17 (see Rom. 4:19-22)
3. Abraham's faith to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice in Genesis 22:10 (see James 2:21-23)

Piper's conclusion is that *saving faith continually produces uninterrupted obedience*. Instead of occurring at a moment in time when a believer is once and for all judicially declared righteous, saving faith is supposedly ever expanding and energized by God. This interpretation of saving faith demands obedient perseverance in the Christian life.

A Better Perspective

Piper's use of Scriptures is admirable, but misuse is the issue. MacArthur's and Piper's view of successive-persevering-faith

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understands faith as an unending and never failing. That would certainly be the case if God is the one producing obedience! However, Abraham experienced several setbacks in his walk with God. Remember Abraham's (1) plan B for a descendant (Gen. 16:1-3) and (2) lies regarding Sarah in Egypt (Gen. 20:1-2). Obviously there were breaches of faith in Abraham's life, negating the example of persevering faith.

Nevertheless the proponents of the "successive-persevering-faith" view contradict themselves when they *do allow* for failure in the Christian life.¹² MacArthur writes, "We will certainly falter at times. We won't always be successful. In fact, some people may seem to experience more failure than success."¹³ To be consistent with their view of faith, they *cannot allow* for failure.¹⁴ If saving faith persists and God produces good works, then faith should without exception yield an obedient life. According to MacArthur's definition, the Christian life cannot include failure. However, the New Testament is full of examples that such is not the case. Abraham would well agree. How about your own experience?

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A better perspective of faith recognizes that faith is passive. Faith is merely trusting in God. From saving faith at conversion to each obedient choice in the Christian life, faith is never the cause but only the basis for choices. Biblically faith is not seen as persevering, never failing, but rather, is associated with life decisions in separate and independent events over time. Believers should persevere in their walk with God by making right choices based on His Word. That is an entirely different view from Reformed theology's concept of persevering faith that produces perseverance in obedience to the end.

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Going Up?

If faith was active, producing obedience, and continually persevering without failing, what would be the result in the Christian life? The only reasonable conclusion is that unailing faith would produce unailing obedience, particularly if the actual One doing the obeying was God. After all, God cannot fail. Those pesky setbacks throw a wrench into this argument.

Either the pursuit of the Christian life is a series of individual-obedient steps made by choices based on faith or an unbroken sequence of divinely produced activity. So, is the biblical concept of faith best represented by climbing steps on a stairway or an elevator ride? It can't be both. You decide.

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Myth 10, NOTES

1. John F. MacArthur, *The Gospel According To Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), p. 173 (italics added).
2. See *Myth 5: Faith Causes Salvation*.
3. See *Myth #6: Faith Is a Decision*.
4. Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995), p. 77.
5. John Piper, *The Desiring God, Affirmation of Faith* (Desiring God website; www.desiringgod.org, October 22, 2004), p. 12.
6. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, pp. 173-175.
Describing the “permanence of genuine faith,” MacArthur indicates the relationship of faith to obedience by using the following quote by W.E. Vine:
Writing about the verb “to obey” (*peitho*), he [Vine] says “*Peitho and pisteuo, ‘to trust,’ are closely related etymologically; the difference in meaning is that the former implies the obedience that is produced by the latter; cf. Heb. 3:18, 19, where the disobedience of the Israelites is said to be the evidence of their unbelief*” (italics added).
MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 47.
MacArthur writes, “Thus the test of true faith is this: does it *produce obedience?* If not, it is not saving faith. Disobedience is unbelief. Real faith obeys” (italics added).
John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1991), pp. 256-257.
Explaining that faith produces obedience, using Hebrews 10:32-36, Piper writes, “The writer to the Hebrews gives another, even more graphic illustration of the way *faith produces obedience*” (italics added).
7. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 47 (italics added).
8. See *Myth 2: Faith Is Active*.
9. See *Myth 5: Faith Causes Salvation*.
10. Piper, *The Desiring God, Affirmation of Faith*, p. 12 (italics added).
11. *Ibid.*, p. 37 (italics added).

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12. A following are advocates of the “successive-faith” view who also allow for failure in the Christian life.

James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 520; L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 514; Mathison, *Rightly Dividing the People of God?*, p. 77; MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 104.

13. John F. MacArthur, *Faith Works* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993), p. 189.
14. Inconsistency in the “successive-faith” view results from holding two opposing concepts at the same time. First, a continuing, persevering, unending faith causes and produces obedience and therefore must produce continuing, persevering, unending obedience in the life of the believer. Second, MacArthur also informs us, “Of course Christians sin. They disobey. They fail. We *all* fall far short of perfection in this life (Phil. 3:12-5)” (*Faith Works*, p. 31; italics his). MacArthur then presents Reformed theology’s usual “*Paradox Defense*” when faced with a contradiction. He says, “There’s a true paradox—not an inconsistency—in those truths. All Christians sin...but all Christians also obey” (Ibid.).