

Textures of faith

John Launchbury

There's a lovely verse in Galatians that says,

The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. (Gal 5:6)

I think that is truly powerful. Well worth dwelling on during quiet prayer time.

As I dwell on this passage, I start to wonder what's so special about faith? Its significance is clear as Paul contrasts the path of loving faith against simply following religious regulations. But why is faith the *only thing* that counts? We know we are saved by faith – but how?

I think faith is highly misunderstood by lots of non-Christians, who often seem to think that faith is having to believe in something with no evidence, or even *despite* evidence. But having said that, I guess there are many Christians who promote a pretty similar view. And to make it worse, many Christians treat faith like an entrance exam: if you just make yourself believe the right things God automatically accepts you, otherwise you have no chance.

I think the biblical perspective on faith is different, that it is fundamentally about *trust*. Take the classic faith verse, which I like to render colloquially as follows,

Faith makes hope solid; it is a reliance on what is unseen. (Heb 11:1)

This is the core idea we will be exploring, that faith is about reliance, it is about trust. But before we dive into more detail, we need a quick word about English translations. In English the word *faith* is only a noun. It's a thing, not an action – English doesn't have *faithing* as a verb. But the original Greek of the New Testament does. Greek uses the same *faith* word as an action, as well as a thing. So, when the New Testament Greek talks about *faithing something*, we have to use a different word to describe it in English. The usual choice is to use the word *believe* or *believing*. So given that this article is in English and not Greek, we will have to use *faith* and *believe* interchangeably. Just remember that in the original Greek, they are the same word.

Two aspects of faith

There seem to be two complementary aspects to faith. One is about facts and the other is about trusting someone's intention and ability. Faith is (1) *believing about things*, and (2) *believing in someone*. But here I have to be careful, for if I said *I believe in God*, most people would take it to be a statement about facts, that I'm asserting that God exists; yet if I were to say, *I believe in the Seattle Seahawks*, that's no longer a statement about whether the sports team exists – it's a statement about whether I think they're going to win or not. So to be clear, every time I use the phrase *believe in someone*, I am going to be using it to mean *placing my trust in them*, whether I'm talking about God or anyone else. Take a moment to frame your mind that way: *believing about God* is the facts, but *believing in God* is about *trusting* in God.

Let's see some examples of the word *faith* used in each way. First, when we talk about a *Statement of Faith* we are using *faith* in the first meaning; it's a statement of propositions that we hold to be true, propositions about the Bible, about God, about Jesus, about the future, and so on. It's a statement about things,

In contrast, when Jesus says, *Anyone who believes (that is, "faiths") in me will live even though they die,*¹ I don't think he's saying it's enough to believe the fact of his existence. Many people acknowledge that there was a Jewish preacher in Palestine two thousand years ago, even though they may not accept his message. Jesus is surely saying that those who trust him will live, those who accept his message and who trust his ability to shepherd them to salvation. He is talking about people who can honestly declare, *I believe in you, Jesus. I trust that you can rescue me completely*. It's like the trust an athlete places in their coach: *I believed in my coach and by following her coaching, I became a better athlete*. It's the kind of faith that leads to following their advice, following the path laid out.

These two aspects are reflective of that first verse in Hebrews 11. Our hope becomes substantive, we have solid beliefs *about things*, and we *rely on an unseen God* who can deliver it. Similarly, five verses later we have the same two threads:

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Heb 11:6)

¹John 11:25

Belief *about* God, that he exists, and belief *in* God, that he rewards. It's not enough just to believe that unseen deity exists. It requires a willingness to trust, to rely on that unseen deity as the source of benefit.

In the same chapter, the New Jerusalem Bible translation regarding Moses expresses these ideas beautifully,

It was by faith Moses left Egypt without fear of the king's anger, he held to his purpose like someone who could see the invisible. (Heb 11:27)

When he leaves Egypt, he has no idea of the path before him. Just think of the ups and downs of his life! There were times when he was fearful – *who am I to talk to Pharaoh?* Times he was overwhelmed – *I don't know how to lead these people.* It was a tough, tough road. But Moses takes it step by step because of his trust in God.

When you don't know the outcome, this kind of reliance is scary. It's risky. It's like a Trust Fall, where you fall backwards and hope your friends or colleagues will catch you. But will they? Or can they – even if they want to?

Any time we have faith in someone, there's going to be risk involved. True reliance implies you have no backup plan. Or to be more accurate, the extent to which you do have a backup plan reflects exactly the extent that you don't fully trust the person to fulfill whatever you were trusting them with.

And this applies to faith in God also. Faith involves risk. But I would go further, that *faith is risk*. Without risk, there is no faith, for who needs faith in that which is already assured and obtained?

That means it's scary to step out in faith. It's like Peter in the boat. He says, *If it is you Jesus, ask me to come to you.*² I mean, how crazy is that? I can imagine the others in the boat saying, *Peter stop it! This is ludicrous!* But he gets out of the boat. He's risking everything. He doesn't know the outcome, but he's willing to take that step. And how wonderful the outcome was! Despite the weakness that showed up when fear stepped in, I'm still in total awe of him. He was willing to get out of the boat! And he trod on the water, taking a step, and then another step. It's just incredible.

² Matthew 14:28

Faith is willing vulnerability

Faith is risk. If I rely on God and he doesn't come through, I lose everything. This is what Paul meant when he said that if there's no resurrection of the dead then we're to be pitied more than anyone – we are absolutely depending on God to fulfill his promise. So faith is not just risk. There's a deep emotional element as well. Faith is willingly allowing ourselves to be *vulnerable*.

The idea of vulnerability has been popularized by the researcher Brené Brown, who studies human states such as *courage* and *vulnerability*, *empathy* and *shame*. Apparently, vulnerability is the most accurate way social scientists have to measure courage. Brown says we can measure how brave you are by how vulnerable you're willing to be, because bravery is stepping into a situation without being able to control how it will turn out.

Love is a great example. To love is to be vulnerable. To give someone your heart – knowing how much it would hurt if it ended badly – is an act of vulnerability. But we do it in faith, *believing in* the other person. Trusting them. It's in our *faith in the other* that we allow ourselves to be vulnerable.

And though vulnerability is hard, the opposite is worse. When we lose our capacity for vulnerability, Brown reports, researchers discover that joy is replaced by foreboding. So while vulnerability can be scary, can feel dangerous, Brown says, *it's not as hard or scary or dangerous as getting to the end of our lives and having to ask ourselves, what if I would have shown up?*³

And this is the situation between us and God. Faith is vulnerability, the willingness to put ourselves in his hands. Or to put it the other way around, if I realize I am not allowing myself to be vulnerable to God, then I have to conclude that my faith is limited. Lack of vulnerability is an indicator that I'm relying on myself and not on God.

What is non-faith?

Let's now look at faith from a different perspective – the so-called negative space. Artists use the notion of negative space to make their images emerge more clearly. So let's do the same with faith. What might count as the opposite of faith – something that is non-faith? If we outline that, it may help us to appreciate more deeply what faith is actually like.

So let's consider some possible candidates.

³ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (2012)

How about *doubt*? At first, doubt seems the perfect candidate as opposite to faith. If faith is belief, then the opposite must be doubting. Right? But then I remember the man who said to Jesus, *I believe, help my unbelief*.⁴ He had faith. It just wasn't very big. It was incomplete: *I've got a bit of faith, help me make up the shortfall*. So in his doubting he was actually manifesting a dimly-burning faith, a mini faith. It was still faith, just small.

Similarly, after Peter stepped out of the boat, he sees the wind and the waves and he starts to fear and begins to sink. He reaches out to Jesus who catches him, saying, *Oh you little faith, why did you doubt?* Peter has doubt, he has unbelief. Yet his faith was far larger than the others who just stayed in the boat. Doubt and unbelief are just a smallness of faith, but they still can be measured by a positive number in the faith dimension. It's just not a very big number.

So what about other contenders for an opposite to faith? I think *sin* is a possible candidate. You may remember that when the friends lowered the paralytic through the roof seeking healing, Jesus saw their faith and said to the one lying on the bed, *Your sins are forgiven*. Jesus saw faith, and tied it to forgiveness. Similarly, Paul tells us that, *whatever is not from faith is sin*.⁵ Yet, while faith and sin appear to be in some sort of opposition, they are not quite *opposites*. If we parse Paul carefully we note he is saying that it is the *non-faith thing* that gets manifested as sin. The sin itself is not opposite to faith, it's the result of something else that is the opposite.

I think scripture shows us that the real opposite of faith is what we might call *haughty self-assurance*. This is the sense that I am complete within myself, pleased with myself, that I don't need to rely on anything or anyone other than myself. The words pride or pridefulness can be used to describes this. Here is how it's put in the proverbs:

Haughty eyes and a proud heart, the unplowed field of the wicked produce sin. (Prov 21:4)

Haughty eyes and the proud heart is the *non-faith thing* that produces sin.

The phrase *the unplowed field* is our natural state as humans before God does his transforming work in us. In that natural state, we have a built-in orientation to seek self-protection, to feel that I am my own person, that I know what's needed, and that I don't need you – and I don't need God either. It's the sense that I need only to rely on myself, and that I would do best if I make myself as strong as possible.

⁴ Mark 9:24

⁵ Matthew 9:2, Romans 14:23

This orientation toward self-reliance is our inheritance as earthly biological creatures, as creatures of dust. And to put it in the language of the sower parable, in that natural state we lie barren. Or, worse, we produce thorns and thistles. Everything then changes, according to the parable, if we are open to receiving the intention of God. The soil that is ready to receive the seed, ready for it to grow, is the soil that produces abundant fruit.

Habakkuk also declares pridefulness as being in opposition to faith,

Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.

(Hab 2:4)

Habakkuk is giving us a clear contrast between pride and faith – two contrasting states of being. A *state of being* is any underlying presumption that we bring to the circumstances of our lives. For example, one person may bring a presumption of superiority, shielded by walls that were constructed to protect a fragile ego. Another may bring a presumption of openness, to others and especially towards God, a willingness to trust in whatever is in store for them rather than relying on themselves to determine it.

Habakkuk says that these different states-of-being lead to different paths in life. As far as God is concerned, something is off with the proud. The root of sin is a proud ego – haughty surety in myself – and God is unable to work with that heart while it remains unyielding. In contrast, faith is the reliance on another. It is humility. It is an acceptance that there is a power higher and larger than myself. And it is a willingness to trust in that power.

To lose everything and find what you never had

So we should ask ourselves: is my path driven by my pride and self-sufficiency, or is it led by a willingness to be open, to have God lead, rather than presume I can just do it all on my own?

Job is a great example here. He knew the facts. He believed all the things about Abraham. He also followed the prescribed religious practices, acting as priest to his family. And in his personal life and business dealings, Job manifested Godly principles. He was fair with everyone and never demeaned those with lower social status. He was scrupulously fair even in the presence of major power imbalances. Why? Because he knew that God was the creator and judge of all, of them as much as of him.

And yet, despite his blamelessness, something was still lacking. Job is a giant amongst us, but he was still incomplete. It was only through losing everything that he gained what is truly important. In losing everything he experienced the futility of relying upon himself. He learned what it is to be vulnerable. He learned the need for true dependence on God.

It was through God's second speech that Job finally comes to this realization. God helps him to see the shards of arrogance he held within. God starts with the fundamental diagnosis,

Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? (Job 40:8)

Job had claimed that if God would just answer him, he'd realize that he was being unfair. But in calling God to account, Job had set himself up in opposition to God, claiming the position of an equal rather than being reliant.

God continues,

Do you have an arm like God's, and can your voice thunder like his? Then... look at all who are proud and bring them low, look at all who are proud and humble them, crush the wicked where they stand. Bury them all in the dust together; shroud their faces in the grave. Then I myself will admit to you that your own right hand can save you. (Job 40:9-14)

God is saying to Job, *If you could tame the proud, you could save yourself.* But of course when we're proud, when we are entirely self-assured, we can't tame ourselves. And that is why faith is vital. The whole experience that Job went through had been to bring him to openness, to vulnerability, to faith. The willing vulnerability of faith is the opening that allows God to make changes within us.

God then invokes a powerful metaphor,

Look at Behemoth, which I made just as I made you. (Job 40:15)

In Hebrew, behemoth is the plural word for beast, but because it is used here in a singular context, it means *mighty beast*. Lots of commentators claim behemoth is the hippopotamus (and that leviathan – another beast word used later – is the crocodile). But I think that's off track. Similar imagery shows up throughout scripture, such as in the monster of Egypt in the Nile, and dragon of Revelation in the sky. In every case, these beasts represent the spirit of rebellious pride within us.

Here we could paraphrase God as saying to Job, *What a mighty beast I made when I made you people!* This beast, says God at the end of his speech, *is king of the sons of pride.*⁶

God's speech is effective. Job's eyes are finally opened. He says,

My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I reject myself and repent in dust and ashes. (Job 42:5-6)

Job has seen the invisible. He is emptied of haughty self-assurance. No more pride and self-reliance. His openness of faith has led him into true communion with the mighty one. Not a fulfillment of a religious regulation, but a relationship with that which is divine.

Self examination

Knowing that faith and pride are opposites can provide us with a useful lens for self examination. We can contemplate areas where we may find ourselves drawn into pride, drawn into haughtiness, drawn into arrogance. It shows us areas in which we are being pulled away from faith.

Consider material possessions. Particularly in the wealthier parts of the world, material possessions can lead to arrogance. If I can now provide for myself, for my family, then I don't need to rely on God for these things – or so I might start telling myself. Yet Jesus calls us to *be like little children*. And children absolutely have to rely on others to provide for them. I'm not saying it's wrong to be well off, but I am saying it's something that we need to keep watching. Financial resources are a risk factor that may lead us to rely on ourselves rather than on God.

Doctrinal certainty can also be a source of pride. Our community grew from addressing errors in mainstream Christianity. From the start, we've explored the truths we've found in scripture, and have come to understand them to be important, vital even. But sometimes, our understanding and certainty are manifested in combativeness, a sort of personal surety: *I know I am right and you are wrong*. And the intellectual certainty can manifest itself more like pride than it does like faith. We need to heed Paul when he says that *knowledge puffs up while love builds up.*⁷

I'm not saying that we shouldn't be studying scripture. Indeed, I love studying scripture. And I'm not saying that we shouldn't have strong views about what God has revealed. I think we

⁶ Job 41:34

⁷ 1Corinthians 8:1

should. But we should be as gentle and inclusive as Jesus was, even with all the depth of insight and knowledge *he* had. He demonstrates the kind of spirit that we should bring to conversations with those who are coming from a different understanding. Our goal should be to find ways to build them up. To lift them up rather than tear them down.

Right living can be another source of pride. On the one hand we all recognize we are far from perfect, yet we sometimes look down on others whose lives have gone seriously awry. It is easy to fall into pride when we're doing many of the right things, easy to think,

God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. (Luke 18:11)

But Jesus says this prayer was from the person to himself, about himself. It's not a prayer of opening the heart. In contrast, the other – the one we might look down on – is the one who recognizes his need, *God, have mercy on me, a sinner*. And he was the one who went away justified.

God wants us to behave well, but not for it to become a matter of pride. Paul says he had to learn this himself,

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more... But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ. (Phil 3:4-9)

That faith is the willingness to be changed. It requires a recognition that I cannot do it by myself, that I'm willing to open myself before God. And when I do exhibit righteousness, it leads me to recognize this is not of my own doing, but that it has been nurtured within me from above.

In these and other areas we need to keep a check on ourselves. Am I self-assured, proud? Haughty even? Or am I remaining humble, open, vulnerable, willing to be moved by God. It's asking whether I'm open to transformation, open to God reshaping me. Because if not, then I'm going to remain of the earth, earthly. But if I have the trusting of faith, the open vulnerability of faith, the persistence of faithfulness, then Christ indeed will be able to shape me, to transform me, to be formed within me, and to make me able to participate in eternity.

In the divine embrace

Psalm 73 exactly describes this journey into faith. It starts with envy of arrogant grandeur.

But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills. (Ps 73:2-5)

These people are so popular, they seem so successful. Maybe our religious commitment has all been for nothing. As the Psalmist wails,

Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence (Ps. 73:13)

But in his despair he comes face to face with the things of God again. He comes to recognize the vacuousness of arrogance,

When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! They are like a dream when one awakes; when you arise, Lord, you will despise them as fantasies. (Ps 73:16-20)

When we see the realities of God, when they become substantive and substantial, when we see how opposite arrogance is, how unyielding a prideful heart is, how soon it's just going to be dust again and never to be remembered... it's in that moment we are of faith.

The psalm summarizes this journey into faith,

When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. (Ps 73:21-23)

The Hebrew word for brute beast here is *behemoth*. It's the only place outside of Job that I have seen this plural word used in a singular context – and in Job this beast is the mighty beast of pride, the devious serpent of rebellious self-sufficiency. When the psalmist was embittered by coveting the arrogant he says, *I was senseless and ignorant; I was behemoth before you*. He was part

of the rebellious beast of pride. But in contrast, in the sanctuary, he finds himself in a place of quiet trust.

*But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge.
(Ps 73:28)*

In another psalm, David powerfully expresses this place of quiet reliance, of peaceful openness, of willing vulnerability. He says,

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me. (Ps 131:1-2)

In faith I rely on God. In faith I allow myself to be vulnerable, open to whatever lies before me. In faith I come to the assurance that there is no longer any alternative but to trust. That there never was. And in faith I'm at peace. With a peace that passes understanding.

Like a weaned child held in its mother's embrace, needing nothing more, so am I with God.