

The Faith of Jesus

By Robert Hach

The New Testament (NT) writers call their readers to believe—to have faith—“in” Jesus, specifically in regard to his being God’s *Anointed* (Hebrew, *Mashiach*, or Messiah; Greek, *Christos*, or Christ: the one whom God anointed to rule God’s kingdom), who died for the sins of all and whom God raised from the dead and exalted to God’s right hand. This is common knowledge among all who profess to be Christians. What is far less well known, however, is that key texts in the letters of the apostle Paul explain that the righteousness of God—a righteousness of faith that includes the forgiveness of sins and the hope of salvation—becomes the possession of believers *not* due to their own faith *in* Jesus but due to the faith *of* Jesus himself.

The NT Jesus is, therefore, not only the *object* of NT faith but also the *source*, as well as the *model*, of NT faith. Which is simply to say that to believe *in* Jesus is *to believe what Jesus believed and, therefore, sought to persuade others to believe*: “the gospel of the kingdom of God” (Luke 4:43). The faith of Jesus is often, by Paul, called “the gospel of Christ” (Rom. 15:19), by which he meant the proclamation not only *about* Jesus but also *by* Jesus, confirmed by the reference of his Roman doxology to “my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ” (Rom. 16:25).

This means that faith that is *in* the NT Jesus is faith that *comes from* the NT Jesus. To have faith *in* the NT Jesus, then, is to take the faith *of* Jesus as one’s own.

Paul’s Testimony to the Faith of Jesus

English NT versions typically render Paul’s references to the righteousness of God and the faith *of* Jesus—in Romans 3:22 and 26; in Galatians 2:16 (twice) and 3:22; and in Philippians 3:9—as faith “in” Jesus. Concerning these texts, translators have been forced to choose between “in” and “of” due to the absence of any preposition between the words “faith” (Greek, *pistis*) and “Jesus” (Greek, *Iesous*) and/or “Christ” (Greek, *Christos*) in the original language. (The original language is *pisteos Iesou Christou* in Rom. 3:22 and Gal. 3:22; *pisteos Iesou* in Rom. 3:26; *pisteos Christou Iesou* in Gal. 2:16a; and *pisteos Christou* in Gal. 2:16c and Phil. 3:9; also, in Eph. 3:12 appears *pisteos autou*, which is typically rendered “faith in him” but may also be rendered “his faith,” that is, the faith *of* Jesus).

The original language allows for either “in” (objective genitive) or “of” (subjective genitive) as possible translations, meaning that immediate context must determine which preposition is the more likely. English versions typically insert “in” rather than “of,” at least partly in view of other “faith” texts in which the preposition “in” (Greek, *eis* or *en*) actually does appear in the original language (for examples, John 3:16 and Gal. 2:16b and 3:26, though Gal. 3:26 may also be translated “sons of God *in* Christ through *the* faith,” that is, the faith *of* Christ).

Probably weighing even more heavily against a decision by English NT translation committees to render Paul’s testimony to the faith *of* Jesus has been the Trinitarian bias of ecclesiastical translators, whose “Jesus” would have had no need for his own faith in God since he himself was “God in the flesh” and “the second Person of the Godhead.” The classic expression of this Trinitarian viewpoint came from the Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas, who wrote that “from the moment of conception Christ had the full vision of the very being of God . . . Therefore he could not have had faith.”¹

However, adding the preposition “of” rather than “in” to those texts in which no preposition appears becomes the more compelling alternative when the texts under consideration are compared to Paul’s reference in Romans to “the faith of Abraham” (Rom. 4:16). In this case also, no preposition appears between the words “faith” and “Abraham” (Greek, *pisteos Abraau*). All English NT versions naturally render the phrase “the faith *of* Abraham” because “faith *in* Abraham” would not make sense.

The fact that Paul’s subject is “the righteousness of God” in all the texts which refer to *pisteos Iesou* or *pisteos Christou*, as well as in his single reference to “the faith of Abraham” (*pisteos Abraau*) makes

¹ Quoted in Richard Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), xlviii.

rendering the relevant texts in terms of the faith “of” rather than faith “in” Jesus even more probably correct. A consideration of the relevant texts in Romans 3 and 4 supports this conclusion.

First, Paul referred to “the righteousness of God *through* [Greek, *dia*] the faith *of* Jesus Christ [Greek, *pisteos Iesou Christou*] *to* [Greek, *eis*] all who believe” (Rom. 3:22). That is to say, “all who believe” *in* Jesus receive “the righteousness of God” by means of “the faith *of* Jesus.” Most English NT versions suffer from redundancy by making Paul say that “the righteousness of God” comes “through faith *in* Jesus Christ to all who believe” *in* Jesus. What is the difference between God’s righteousness coming *through* faith in Jesus and coming *to* believers in Jesus? This rendering makes Paul repeat himself in two successive prepositional phrases.

Instead, for Paul, the faith *of* Jesus is the medium *through* which God’s righteousness comes *to* believers *in* him, that is, to those whose faith is informed by and modeled after Jesus’ faith.

Second, Jesus’ death on the cross serves “to show [God’s] righteousness at the present time, that [God] should be just and justifying the one of the faith *of* Jesus” (Rom. 3:26, the Greek words rendered “righteousness” and “just” and “justifying” are all part of the same word family). In other words, God *justifies*—counts as *righteous*—all whose faith is “of” the faith *of* Jesus. To have faith *in* Jesus, then, is to take the faith *of* Jesus as one’s own, so that the *righteousness* of God working in Jesus’ faith, shown especially in his crucifixion, comes to all who are “of” his faith.

Paul’s reasoning in regard to both “faith” and “righteousness” is dependent on a *covenantal* rather than a *legal* definition of righteousness and, therefore, of justification.

The *legal* (and, not coincidentally, the ecclesiastical and, therefore, the popular) definition of righteousness is *God’s obligation to his law*: God has no choice but to justify the one who obeys and to condemn the one who disobeys his law. (Note that forgiveness is not an option for the God of legal righteousness: justifying sinners *because* Jesus paid for their sins is *not* the same as forgiving them in that forgiveness is, by definition, *the cancellation of an unpaid debt*; more on this below). By this *legal* definition, Jesus’ righteousness was not a righteousness of, a justification by, faith but, rather, a righteousness of, a justification by, works.

Accordingly, the God of legal righteousness justifies sinners *not* because he forgives their sins *but* because of Jesus’ obedience to the law and Jesus’ payment for sins. This *cannot* be a matter of forgiveness because forgiveness is, by definition, *the cancellation of an unpaid debt* whereas God, according to the *legal* (and ecclesiastical) interpretation of the atonement, justifies sinners *not* because he has forgiven their sins but *because he has been paid* (or, according to the Trinitarian gospel, *has paid himself*) by the blood of Jesus to justify them. Ecclesiastical Christianity’s so-called (and misnamed) “forgiveness” comes *after* the legal justification, which itself excludes the possibility of real forgiveness in that *God’s justification of sinners is equivalent to God’s acceptance of Jesus’ payment for their sins*.

The same objection to the ecclesiastical theory of the atonement is expressed in *The Racovian Catechism*, the Socinian treatise on biblical unitarianism:

But to a free forgiveness nothing is more opposite than . . . the payment of an equivalent price.

For where a creditor is satisfied, either by the debtor himself, or by another person on the debtor’s behalf, it cannot with truth be said of him that he freely forgives the debt.²

According to the ecclesiastical theory of the atonement, God’s *legal* justice demanded payment for sins, and Jesus’ blood provided payment so as to enable God to be *legally just* and, at the same time, to *legally justify* sinners. Since law, due to its demand for payment, is incapable of forgiveness (that is, *of canceling an unpaid debt*), the ecclesiastical God of *legal* justice is equally incapable of forgiveness. (This, I surmise, is why too many adherents of ecclesiastical Christianity have been unable to receive God’s forgiveness and, therefore, remain guilt-ridden).

The widespread belief that God’s righteousness is a matter of law-keeping—and, therefore, came to Jesus through his obedience to the Mosaic law—ignores the definitive biblical text regarding the human reception of God’s righteousness: “Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6). Just as was Abraham, Jesus was justified by faith in God’s promise.

² Thomas Rees, *The Racovian Catechism* (Indianapolis: Reprinted by Christian Educational Services, 1994), 305.

Jesus was *not* righteous because he obeyed the Mosaic law; instead, Jesus obeyed the Mosaic law *because he was righteous*, that is, because he believed God's Abrahamic promise.

This interpretation accords with Paul's quotation of Habakkuk 2:4 as thematic for Romans: "The righteous one will live by faith" (Rom. 1:17b). For Paul, Habakkuk 2:4 is arguably a Messianic prophecy: Jesus, as God's *Anointed*, is the prophesied and coming "righteous one" who would, therefore, "live by faith" and, in so doing, serve as the instrument through which God would justify believers. As Paul explains, and supports with the Habakkuk quotation, the gospel reveals "a righteousness of God *from* [Greek, *ek*] faith *to* [Greek, *eis*] faith" (Rom. 1:17a). That is to say, God's righteousness comes "from" the faith of Jesus "to" the faith of believers.³

And this interpretation accords with the *covenantal* (and biblical but largely unheard of) definition of righteousness: God's faithfulness to his promise (see Neh. 9:7-8; Rom. 3:3, 5; 1 John 1:9), which conditions justification, therefore, on ongoing faith in the promise. According to the *covenantal* definition, Jesus' righteousness was a righteousness of, a justification by, faith in that Jesus believed God's promise to bless all nations in Abraham's seed (see Gen. 12:1-3; 18:18; Gal. 3:8)—believing himself to *be* Abraham's seed—and so was justified by faith.

Accordingly, God's justification of sinners *is* a matter of forgiveness in that, by forgiving sinners, God fulfilled his Abrahamic promise to bless all nations, showing himself to "be just [that is, faithful to his Abrahamic promise] and justifying [that is, counting as righteousness the faith of] the one of the faith of Jesus" (Rom. 3:26).

If the blood of Jesus played the role of *paying* God to justify sinners, the possibility of forgiveness (which, again, is the cancellation of an *unpaid* debt) would be excluded.

Instead, however, Jesus' blood plays the indispensable role of providing believers with the assurance of God's forgiveness: the assurance that God will, indeed, not hold their sins against them on the day of judgment (as if they were under law) but, instead, will welcome them into his everlasting kingdom. (Accordingly, unbelievers will perish *not* because God holds their sins against them, being obligated by his law to make them pay, *but* because of their unbelief regarding God's promise; just as the *covenantal* definition of righteousness is faithfulness, so the *covenantal* definition of unrighteousness is unbelief.)

This assurance of God's forgiveness in the face of the coming day of judgment is a true reflection of the faith of Jesus, who faced the judgment of the cross with the assurance that his God and Father would raise him from the dead and exalt him to God's right hand in the coming kingdom. Accordingly, believers *in* Jesus face the day of judgment with the assurance of the faith of Jesus, in the righteousness of *his* faith, which they have taken as their own. (This is not a matter of "cheap grace" in that just as Jesus expressed his faith in loving service and sacrifice, so his faith persuades believers to behave accordingly.)

Therefore, God did not forgive sins *because* Jesus died on the cross; instead, Jesus died on the cross *because* God is forgiving, and so provided the blood of Jesus to believers as the "assurance" of his forgiveness (Heb. 10:22), the demonstration of God's "perfect love [which] casts out fear [of] punishment" (1 John 4:18).

Regarding the third *faith-of* text in Romans, God's "promise to Abraham and his seed...*through* [Greek, *dia*] the righteousness of faith" (Rom. 4:13) applies to "those who are of the faith of Abraham" (Rom. 4:16). So, Paul established the connection between Abraham's faith and Jesus' faith: The "righteousness [not of law but] of faith"—exemplified initially, and imperfectly, by Abraham, and exemplified finally, and perfectly, by Jesus—is the instrument through which God's Abrahamic promise was fulfilled and, therefore, comes to all who align their own faith with the faith of Abraham, whose faith was perfected by Jesus, Abraham's seed.

Paul's point that God's promise to bless all nations was given to "Abraham and his seed"—whom Paul made clear in his earlier letter to the Galatians "is Christ" (Gal. 3:16)—is the key to understanding the relationship between "the faith of Abraham" and "the faith of Jesus." Just as God's righteousness came to Abraham through Abraham's faith in God's promise—to give Abraham a son, through whom God would make of Abraham a great nation, through which God would bless all nations (see Gen. 12:1-3;

³ Douglas A. Campbell, "Romans 1:17: A Crux Interpretum for the [*Pistis Christou*] Debate" (*Journal of Biblical Literature*, Summer 1994), 281, 284.

15:1-6; 18:18; Gal. 3:8)—and through Abraham’s faith God’s righteousness came to Israel, so God’s righteousness came to Jesus through Jesus’ faith in God’s Abrahamic promise, and through Jesus’ faith God’s righteousness comes to believers of all nations.

Jesus, then, is the true “seed” of Abraham because he, just as Abraham before him, believed God’s Abrahamic promise and so received God’s righteousness. And just as Israel’s righteousness came through Abraham’s faith in God’s promise (and was eventually forfeited due to national unbelief/idolatry), so the righteousness of the international community of faith comes through Jesus’ faith in God’s promise to bless all nations in Abraham’s seed.

The NT Jesus inaugurated the new covenant between God and all nations by believing God’s Abrahamic promise to bless all nations through Abraham’s seed. Jesus manifested his faith in God’s promise by means of his proclamation of the good news of the kingdom of God, which led to his crucifixion at the hands of the religious (Jewish) and political (Roman) establishments (the “Church and State”) of first-century Judea.

That is to say, because Jesus believed—was persuaded—that his good news of the kingdom of God constituted God’s announcement of the fulfillment of God’s Abrahamic promise to bless all nations, Jesus sought to persuade his hearers to believe the good news. And because the implicit internationalism of his good news of the kingdom (which would subsequently spread to all nations through his apostles) threatened the nationalism of both the Jewish and the Roman authorities, Jesus’ message—his faith—led to his execution by crucifixion.

Jesus’ proclamation and crucifixion, then, manifested his faith in the promise of God, who therefore vindicated Jesus (i.e., declared him righteous/faithful) by raising him from the dead and exalting him to God’s right hand in the coming kingdom. And by doing so, God revealed that he would fulfill his Abrahamic promise to bless all nations by raising the international community of faith from death to life in the kingdom of God at Jesus’ *parousia*, at the end of the present age.

The Testimony of John’s Gospel to the Faith of Jesus

While the Gospel of John does not, like Paul’s letters, refer explicitly to the faith *of* Jesus, Jesus’ faith is nowhere more clearly expressed than in Jesus’ words according to John’s Gospel.

Jesus’ faith, according to John’s Gospel, was informed by “the word” that God the Father revealed to him and which Jesus came to fulfill. The perfect faith of Jesus *is* the sense in which “the word became flesh” (John 1:14).

Jesus’ references to his so-called “preexistence” were not the product of recollection, memories of his personal experience as “God the Son” with God the Father before time began. Instead, Jesus’ knowledge of his “preexistence” was *the product of revelation*. That is, God the Father revealed to Jesus the Son through the Spirit the knowledge of Jesus’ Messianic role in God’s purpose from “the beginning” (John 1:1), and *Jesus believed God’s revelation*. As a result, Jesus proclaimed his Messianic glory as existing in the foreknowledge of God before time began.

John’s Jesus testifies to his heavenly “preexistence”: “He who comes from heaven is above all. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard . . .” (John 3:31-32). How did Jesus know that he had come “from heaven”? What had Jesus “seen and heard” that gave him this knowledge? The ecclesiastical interpretation is that Jesus’ knowledge of his “preexistence” came from his recollection of his personal experience as the so-called “pre-incarnate Word,” who existed as “God the Son” with God the Father before creation.

This interpretation, however, rejects Jesus’ own explanation of his knowledge about his having come “from heaven”: “For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for [God] gives the Spirit [to and through the Son] without measure” (John 3:34). According to Jesus’ own testimony, “the words of God” which Jesus spoke about his coming “from heaven” were given to him by “the Spirit.” Which is to say that *this knowledge was revealed to him by God*. The Father gave the Son “the Spirit without measure” in the sense that Jesus received *the complete revelation of God’s purpose*, the very heart of which was Jesus’ Messianic role in God’s purpose, a role that existed in “the word” from “the beginning” (John 1:1).

What Jesus had “seen and heard,” regarding his having come “from heaven,” was not, therefore, his divine recollection of his personal experience as the so-called “preincarnate Word” (the way a human

being remembers what she or he has “seen and heard” from personal experience). To the contrary, Jesus had “seen” *the angelic visions* and “heard” *the angelic voices* that were, throughout biblical history, the instrument of God’s revelation through “the Spirit” to his human messengers. (Biblical angels are also called “spirits,” signifying their revelatory function as messengers.) Whether in human form (see Gen. 18-19; 32:22-32) or in the form of supernatural creatures (see Exo. 3:1-6; Isa. 6; Eze. 1-2), angels *appeared* to God’s human messengers and *announced* God’s word to them so that God’s human messengers could, in turn, proclaim God’s word to God’s people.

The difference between Jesus and the messengers of God who preceded him was *not* that he, unlike them, “pre-existed” his birth as the “preincarnate Word.” Instead, while Moses and the prophets had received God’s revelation in various parts (see Heb. 1:1), Jesus received “the Spirit without measure” (John 3:34), that is, the fullness of “the word,” revealing to him his role as God’s *Anointed One* in God’s purpose from “the beginning” (John 1:1) as well as in God’s promise in “the scriptures” (John 5:39). Unlike the *partial revelations* of God received by Jesus’ prophetic predecessors, the *complete revelation* Jesus received was *about himself*, the one whom God foreknew and foreordained from the beginning to redeem God’s people.

Therefore, God’s revelation about Jesus’ heavenly “preexistence” as the purpose of God had come through “the Spirit” *to* Jesus, and *through* Jesus came to his apostles, who subsequently proclaimed to all nations the revelation of Jesus’ Messianic role in God’s purpose for his creation and in God’s promise to his people.

Jesus’ references to his so-called “preexistence,” then, expressed not his memories of personal experience before the creation of the world but *his faith in* “the word,” which God the Father had revealed to him through “the Spirit.” Jesus’ “preexistence,” then, was not *personal* but *prophetic*, which is to say that Jesus “pre-existed” his birth *in the form of* “the word”: the original purpose (and later the Abrahamic promise) of God for creation.

And so, when John’s Jesus says, “before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58), he expresses his faith in “the word” that his coming—and, therefore, his existence—as God’s *Anointed* was foreknown and foreordained not only “before Abraham was” but even before the world was created. And because of God’s righteousness—that is, his faithfulness—whatever God purposes and promises, God foreknows and foreordains, which means that it constitutes a “pre-existent” reality from the instant God purposed it.

Likewise, when Jesus says, “And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed” (John 17:5), Jesus expresses his faith in “the word” that “the glory” that he will soon experience through his death and resurrection was purposed—and therefore existed as a foreknown and foreordained reality in the mind of God—“before the world existed.”

This interpretation of Jesus’ “preexistence” is consistent with the biblical definition of faith: “Now faith is the reality of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). Jesus believed that his “hoped for” glorification via resurrection from the dead and exaltation to God’s right hand was “the glory I had with you before the world existed” (John 17:5). Which is to say that Jesus’ “hoped for” glorification had been a “reality” since the beginning because God had foreknown and foreordained it, so that Jesus could ask the Father to “glorify me in your presence” through resurrection and exaltation “with the glory that I had with you before the world existed” (John 17:5). John’s Jesus, then, speaks of his “hoped for” glorification as a pre-existent “reality” because God the Father purposed it in “the beginning.”

In the case of Abraham, God’s promise came with the words, “I have made you the father of many nations” (Gen. 17:5; Rom. 4:17), centuries before Abraham actually became “the father of many nations.” The faith of Abraham was his *persuasion* that his international fatherhood was *as good as done*—a “pre-existent” reality—*because God had promised it*. Which is to say that God’s promise was a *reality of faith* for Abraham centuries before it became a *reality of fact*.

Likewise, Jesus’ glorification through resurrection from the dead was a *reality of faith* for him before it occurred—in truth, for Jesus, his existence as the glorified Messiah had been a reality from “the beginning”—because God had purposed it and revealed that purpose to him through “the Spirit.” Jesus’ faith, therefore, was “the reality of things hoped for [specifically, his hoped-for glorification]” (Heb. 11:1a). And Jesus’ faith was “the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1b): the evidence that God will indeed raise those of the faith *of* Jesus from death to everlasting life in the coming kingdom of God.

And so, though believers' salvation from death and entrance into the kingdom await the *parousia* of Jesus to raise the dead, judge the world and bring the kingdom, believers "were saved" (Rom. 8:24), *not* when they believed or were baptized *but* when God raised Jesus from the dead. Believers have *already* entered "the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Col. 1:13), *not* when they believed or were baptized *but* when God exalted Jesus to his right hand in the coming kingdom.

Which is to say that believers in the NT gospel receive the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus. Accordingly, believers receive what God has promised, first, as a life-transforming *reality of faith* and then, at Jesus' *parousia*, an eschatological *reality of fact*.

This is the faith that the NT Jesus modeled and, therefore, that NT believers are called to receive through the NT proclamation of Jesus' gospel of the kingdom.

Receiving the Faith of Jesus

If believing *in* Jesus means receiving the faith of Jesus through hearing and believing the NT gospel, then the primary purpose of the study of scripture must, accordingly, be to identify and understand Jesus' faith, for the purpose of making Jesus' faith one's own.

Just as Paul summarized his gospel in terms of "faith, hope and love" (1 Cor. 13:13), so to receive Jesus' faith must mean to take Jesus' hope and Jesus' love as one's own.

Regarding *hope*, Jesus believed and so proclaimed "the gospel of the kingdom of God" (Luke 4:43) as the promise of the ultimate fulfillment of God's Abrahamic promise to bless all nations. The eschatological coming of God's kingdom was, therefore, both the *objective* hope toward which Jesus' faith pointed and the *subjective* hope that his faith planted and rooted in his own heart. While Jesus proclaimed the imminent coming of the kingdom with the words, "the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15), Jesus also acknowledged his own ignorance regarding the timing of the kingdom's arrival: "But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32). Notwithstanding the difficulties for faith that the seeming delay of the kingdom's arrival may pose, Jesus' faith in God's promise of the Messiah's resurrection from the dead and exaltation to God's right hand in the coming kingdom stands as the coming-age hope of all who take the Messianic faith of Jesus as their own.

Regarding *love*, Jesus' faith in God's Abrahamic promise to bless all nations was expressed in a life of loving servanthood for the sake of his gospel of the kingdom. Jesus evidently saw no contradiction between God's revelation to him of his role as the Messianic Son of Man, the ruler of God's coming kingdom (see Dan. 7:13-14), and his role as God's suffering servant (see Isa. 53): "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Likewise, to receive the faith of Jesus is to *believe as he believed* in the love of God for all nations and, therefore, *to love others as God in Christ has loved one and all*.

Paul's letters (along with the other NT writings) are, indeed, best understood as instructions for believing readers to adopt and embrace the faith—and, therefore, the hope and love—of Jesus as their own: "For through the Spirit, by *faith*, we ourselves eagerly wait for the *hope* of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything but only *faith* working through *love*" (Gal. 5:5-6).

And so NT believers are called to run the same race of faith that was run by Jesus himself, "looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of the faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising its shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2).