

Dear members and friends of St. John,

As Lutherans, we understand the importance of **faith**. The Reformation credo, *Salvation by "grace alone," through "faith alone," on the basis of "Scripture alone,"* reminds us of the importance of faith. **It's absolutely essential for gaining entrance into heaven when we die.**

With something as important as this, you'd think Lutherans would have a pretty good handle on **saving "faith."** How does Scriptures define faith? *"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation"* (Hebrews 11:1-2, ESV). In short, faith merely latches onto the promises of Scriptures. Unfortunately, other denominations have muddied the waters considerably when it comes to the definition of "faith." Let's examine faith in more detail.

**First, "faith" is not a substance or thing that resides inside of us.** Other churches may lead you to think faith is a substance that you can fortify yourself with. They'll tell you to "believe more," or "trust more," as if this is something you have the power or ability to carry out. Churches that tell you to look inside yourself for a "feeling" or "sense" of faith, are misleading the poor Christian to seek something that doesn't exist inside of them. Many Christians who are misled in such a manner become disillusioned or distraught when the "feeling of God" no longer can be felt. They begin to question whether or not they are still saved; has God abandoned them; has their faith left them?

**Second, "faith" can be weak or strong.** From Luke 17, we read: *"<sup>15</sup>The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!' <sup>16</sup>And the Lord said, 'If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.'"* The understanding here is that **even a tiny amount of faith provides salvation.** However, **weak faith is not desirable**, for weak faith allows Satan's temptations, worldliness, and our own sinful nature to impede the work that God has prepared for us to do and may harm our worship life. **If we allow these opposing forces to separate us from God's Word and Sacraments, our faith may even wither and die (see John 15:3-6).** In Luke chapter 7, Jesus commends the faith of the Centurion, who told Jesus not to come to his house, but instead simply say the word and his servant would be healed. Jesus said, *"I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith"* (7:9). **Strong faith forms a defensive barrier against Satan's attacks**, especially when he tries to get us to despair or even reject our life in Christ. When will Satan attempt this? When we're at our weakest, facing difficult trials in life. Or, when our lives are running so smoothly that we are tempted to forget the need for a Savior from sin. Strong faith is a strong defense, but even a tiny amount of faith will open the gate of heaven when you die.

**Other denominations will tell you that you face trials in life because you have weak faith.** They will tell you that "If only your faith was stronger. Then your problems [sickness, disease, financial difficulties, relationship troubles] would all depart from you!" **This is totally false.** It leads people to believe that God has **a threshold of faith**, and unless you reach this threshold, you're outside of His grace and protection. What a terrible understanding of God's word. St. Paul says, in Romans chapter 5: *"More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us"* (vv. 3-5). God's plan for His faithful people includes suffering and trials, because

it's what's best for us.

**Third, saving "faith" is a receptive instrument that allows a Christian to receive the benefits that Christ has won for us on the cross.** Let me use an illustration to clarify what I mean. I want you to think for a moment about "faith" in terms of a cellphone and the signal strength bars on it. You know, those little bars that show that you either have poor or no reception (1 or zero bars showing) or great reception (4 bars showing). With poor or zero faith, God's ability to communicate with us about His Son, and His saving work on the cross is hampered or is impossible (zero bars). With "one bar" of faith, we believe in Jesus, but our faith is easily challenged by doubts that come from the world, our own human reason, and Satan's temptations. We will listen to other voices, because their reception will dominate, not God's Word. With 4 bars of "faith," we have a greater connection to God and we strongly believe in Jesus and His cross for our salvation and life. Our communication with our Lord is very good, through frequent prayer and a robust worship life. While doubts will still come to us in times of weakness, the "four bars of faith" is a level of trust that is able to provide a strong shield against the world, our flesh, and Satan's attempts at tearing us away from our Lord.

Notice that **faith** in this analogy **is outside of us**. It isn't tied to an emotional feeling. The cellphone analogy breaks down when we look at how cellphone bars change. Just changing locations will not change our faith, like it changes our cellphone reception. However, it does point to proper understanding of faith, because it points to **the ultimate purpose of faith: Allowing the believer to trust in Christ's work on the cross for salvation and life. Faith always points outside of us, to the cross of Jesus Christ.** The Bible tells us that without faith, it is impossible to say that Jesus is Lord (1 Cor. 12:3) It's also impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). To sum up, God's Spirit that indwells provides us with the receptive instrument called "faith" that makes it possible for us to believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

**Finally, saving "faith" is not something that man can generate on his own.** We read from Romans 10: *"So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ"*(v. 17). The "word of Christ" that St. Paul refers to is the Gospel. Again, from Romans – this time chapter 1 – we read: *"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 for faith**, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith'"*(v. 16, 17 – bold text by Pastor).

**There's power in the Gospel of Jesus Christ to change us. And that change begins with belief in Christ.** This belief is saving "faith." Notice that St. Paul doesn't leave the door open to saving "faith" coming in other ways, apart from the Gospel. You can't use logic to argue Christianity into an unbeliever. It simply will not work. You must present the Gospel. What is this Gospel: we are all sinners who cannot stop sinning. Knowing our condition, God sent His only Son, Jesus, born of a virgin, to die with our sins as a propitiation (or payment) for all of them. Jesus rose on Easter to defeat our great foe, death. Now, all who believe in Jesus as Savior will not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16-17). Now, having been brought to faith, **the Gospel and the Sacrament of the Altar is the means in which God strengthens our faith.** We count on **God's means of grace** to sustain and grow us, until we see Him face-to-face.

Indeed, we believe in ***faith alone*** for salvation – **no good works, or good deeds on our part**

**can contribute to this.** God has done all of the work, through His Son's death on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. **We are declared "righteous" by God** who accepts our faith in Jesus when we die (or when He returns again in glory) as **a substitutionary righteousness** in Jesus' shed blood. Wonderfully simple, so that even infants can believe, and yet, completely unreasonable from the standpoint of human wisdom. **Faith – so precious that nothing else can compare.** May God continue to keep us in the one true faith, until we are with Him forever in heaven. Amen.

Pastor Travis