

What Is Faith?

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R. C. SPROUL

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Chapter One

A Hopeful Vision

When we talk about Christianity, we are more likely to call it the “Christian faith” than the “Christian religion.” This is appropriate in that the concept of faith is fundamental to Christianity because faith is central to the biblical view of redemption. Yet faith is a many-faceted concept, so even many professing Christians struggle to understand exactly what it is.

In this booklet, I want to explore the nature of faith as it is defined in the Bible. We will focus on how faith relates

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to our salvation and will discuss the necessary ingredients of what we call “saving faith.” We’ll also look at how faith relates to reason and at other issues that we encounter in the Bible with respect to this concept.

Faith Is the Substance of Hope

The most foundational definition for faith in the Bible is found in Hebrews: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good testimony” (11:1–2, NKJV). Note the distinction the author of Hebrews makes between faith and hope. These ideas are intimately connected, but they are distinct nonetheless. In a similar way, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13 of the great triad of Christian virtues: faith, hope, and love. This passage also reveals that there is a distinction between faith and hope.

Before we explore the link between these concepts, let me address the biblical idea of hope, because the word *hope* functions somewhat differently in the New Testament than it does in Western countries today. When we use the word *hope*, we usually are referring to an emotional state of desire in our hearts regarding what we would like to happen in

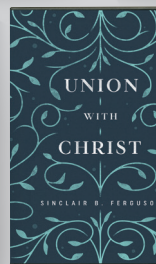
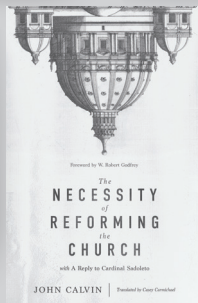
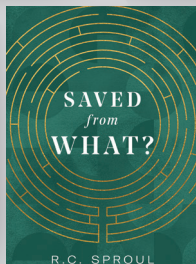
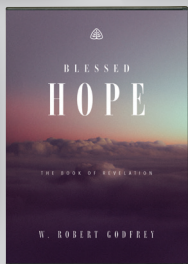
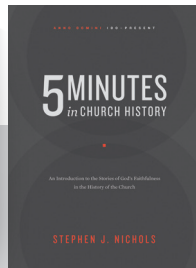
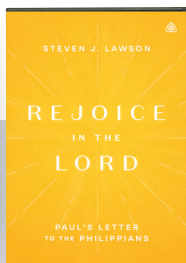
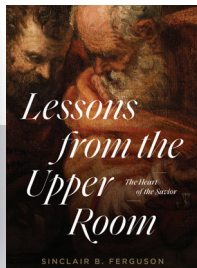
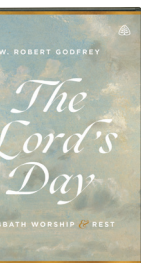
A Hopeful Vision

the future but are not sure will come to pass. We may hope that our favorite teams will win football or basketball games, but that hope may never materialize. For instance, I am a perennial fan of the Pittsburgh Steelers, and I regularly hope that the Steelers will win their football games. This may be a vain and futile hope because it's anything but a certainty. There is a kind of hope that does not make us ashamed (cf. Rom. 5:5), but I'm constantly afraid that my hopes for the Steelers may make me ashamed, for while they regularly win championships, they lose games, too.

However, when the Bible speaks of hope, it is not referring to a desire for a future outcome that is uncertain, but rather a desire for a future outcome that is absolutely sure. Based on our trust in the promises of God, we can be fully confident about the outcome. When God gives His people a promise for the future, and the church grasps it, this hope is said to be the “anchor of the soul” (Heb. 6:19). An anchor is that which gives a ship protection against aimless drifting in the sea. The promises of God for tomorrow are the anchor for believers today.

When the Bible says “faith is the *substance* of things hoped for” (Heb. 11:1, emphasis added), it is speaking of something that has weight or significance—something of

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