

**Brief Review:** In part 3 we continue the discussion of faith begun in Part 2. You may wonder why am I spending two lessons on faith and its role in Christian life. The first reason is the importance that Scripture places on faith. Hebrews 11:6a says, “*And without faith it is impossible to please him.*” The second reason is faith has several important aspects, of which only a few are usually discussed.

Paul speaks to the importance of faith in God in Galatians 5:6 (NIV), “...*The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*” The Bible, as God’s Word, is the only infallible rule for faith and life. We study the Bible to learn how to live to please God. The principal themes of the Bible are (1.) what we are to believe concerning God and (2.) what duty God requires of us.

Faith in God is often asserted to be “blind faith.” It isn’t. Faith in God is rational because of His trustworthiness. He keeps His promises. Faith in God is based on reasons to believe His trustworthiness. To speak of faith in God without a foundation of reasons justifying that trust would be meaningless.

**Saving and Sustaining Faith:** Believer’s faith is a gift from God. In thinking about faith’s role in life, it is convenient to think of believer’s faith as one thing consisting of two aspects: **Saving faith and sustaining faith.**

**Saving Faith:** God’s gift of saving faith is associated with regeneration and is a part of God’s saving grace. Regeneration is a single instantaneous event, initiated and completed by God. Regeneration lifts a sinner from spiritual death to spiritual life. Those regenerated receive God’s gift of faith and justification (being declared legally righteous before God). Justification is God legally pardoning the penalty due a sinner’s sin based on Christ’s atoning sacrifice. The Holy Spirit comes to indwell the new believer. The new believer’s reality is so different than their old reality that Paul says they are like a new person.

The connected events associated with regeneration are logically sequential but not separable in time. The conversion of a sinner into a new believer is instantaneous, an act carried out by God alone. Sinners are passive in regeneration, receiving faith, and justification. Paul, in Ephesians 2:4-7, uses 4 words to express “why” God raises the spiritually dead to life: Love (v4), mercy (v4), grace (v5), and kindness (v7).

God is sovereign, holy, just, and full of wrath against sin. But praise His holy name, He is also love, mercy, grace, and kindness and offers salvation to sinners. Enabled by God's gift of saving faith, new believers role is to repent and submit to God in Christ. The eternal penalty for sin is cancelled, and they are adopted into God's family. The Holy Spirit indwells them and begins the process of transforming them into a moral likeness of Christ.

**Sustaining Faith:** Sustaining faith is associated with sanctification. The sanctification process requires an extended period of time. Faith must not falter during that process. So God gives the gift of sustaining faith.

Believers participate in a limited way in sanctification. The Holy Spirit works inward transformation. The believer is to do external things which cooperate and correspond to what the Spirit is doing inwardly. As sanctification progresses, sustaining faith supports the believer every minute of every day throughout their life. Sustaining faith keeps a believer going when everything seems wrong and doubts assail. Sustaining faith keeps believers focused and thinking rightly. It enables active trust and obedience to God in their daily life. It enables cooperating with the Holy Spirit as He works to transform them into a moral image of Christ.

We express our "faith in God" (1.) in active devotion to Him, which we call worship and prayer, and (2.) in good works, which we call ministry. Ephesians 2:10 speaks of ministry, ***"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."***

Regeneration and justification recreate us spiritually making us into new creatures "in Christ." Sustained faith in Christ and love for Him enables life to be lived to please God. In John 14:15 Jesus said, ***"If you love me, you will obey what I command."*** Faith, love for Christ, and obedience go together.

**Further Comments on Faith:** Like all trust, faith, involves the intellect (knowledge), affections (emotions), and volition (will). All three are essential to faith. Making decisions and reaching conclusions depends on faith both natural and believer's. The route to understanding is often through faith. For example, believing through faith that it is possible to understand a new disease encourages the expenditure of effort and money to do the research and testing to understand that disease so that it can be treated and perhaps prevented. It is risky but worth the risk.

**Intellect:** A person's intellect refers to the faculty of reasoning and understanding objectively. Faith needs the intellect. The intellect needs faith.

**Emotions:** A person's emotions produce instinctive responses as distinguished from the intellect's reasoned responses. No one has to think about whether or not they are afraid. Fear is instinctive. You are simply afraid and know it. Other emotions include love, hate, courage, anger, rage, calm, satisfied, sad, glad, happy, shame, joy, surprise, trust, anticipation, pity, excitement, indifference, confidence, envy, indignation, disgust, kindness, cruelty. Emotions affect faith. Faith affects emotions.

**Volition (Will):** Thinking about the role of the "will" in faith is more complex. Questions arising include: How does volition work? What role does the will play in deciding? When we speak of "a strong will" or "a weak will," what do we mean? Does strength of will affect decisions?

God is sovereign in all things. The human will and decision making process necessarily fall under God's sovereignty, yet in such way that people remain responsible for their decisions and actions. That may seem like a contradiction, but it isn't. Some people accept this position by simply saying, we don't understand the details, but we accept both God's sovereignty and human responsibility because Scripture teaches both. An understanding of the "why" behind Scripture's teaching is possible. For centuries Christian theologians have wrestled with that issue. How can God be sovereign in all things, and yet humans are responsible moral agents. A moral agent is a person who has the ability to discern right from wrong and is held accountable for his or her own actions.

**How Does Volition Work?** Volition is typically described as the faculty or power of using the will to decide. Jonathon Edwards, in his book, **On the Freedom of the Will (1754)**, provides a good explanation of how volition works. Edwards begins by making the crucial point that the human will does not operate as an independent faculty. The will is, in fact, interlocked with and responds to other faculties of the mind like the intellect, emotions, imagination, and memory. Think about it and you will agree. The will itself functions much like a balance scale, weighing desires and intellectual inclinations for and against a particular choice. The greatest desire and inclination at the instant of choice determines the decision. The relative strength of the "will" is not important. What is important is the strength of the various desires and inclinations at decision time.

Every decision anyone makes is consistent with the desires and inclinations of the decision maker. That truth means every person is accountable for their choices. Their own desires and inclinations produce their decisions. No coercion from God is involved. Each choice is consistent with their desires and inclinations as determined by their intellect, emotions, and memory. People weigh alternatives and the anticipated consequences and follow their strongest inclination to a decision.

Edwards says the process of “weighing desires and inclinations” is not optional. People can do no other than always choose according to their strongest inclination at the instant of choice. The will always works in coordination with the intellect, emotions, and memory. Does this explanation account for fallen nature’s inability to make righteous choices? Yes!

Decisions are always compatible with the strongest desires and inclinations at decision time. It is the moral character of desires and inclinations that is in question. Everyone has the moral ability to distinguish right from wrong, but in the fallen state people lack the moral inclination to choose God.

People can and do choose what they desire and are inclined toward, but the fallen nature will never desire or be inclined toward God and His righteousness. That doesn’t mean fallen people don’t do things considered good. They may or may not be generous with their possessions, kind, well-spoken, and well-behaved. The point is they do not and cannot choose God and His righteousness. For that to happen, God must intervene. Regeneration changes the person and makes choosing God and His righteousness possible.

### **How Intellect, Emotions, and Volition Affect Faith:**

(1.) **Intellect** supplies reasons to establish faith in an object (person or thing). I say reasons sufficient to justify trust because often our knowledge is incomplete. But decisions must be made anyway. Failing to make timely decisions is in itself a decision with consequences. No matter how limited, if what we know at decision time sounds reasonable, or at least doesn’t sound wrong, we will make the necessary decision based on what we know. That is true even if we desperately want more information before making the decision. Some decisions can wait, others can’t.

(2.) **Emotions** add with a feeling of rightness or subtract with a feeling of wrongness to the intellectual evidence for trustworthiness. A feeling that everything

seems to fit supports trustworthiness. A negative feeling detracts from trustworthiness. J.B Phillips said that, while translating the documents of the New Testament, he was profoundly affected by their “ring of truth.” That “ring of truth” strongly supported his judgment the documents he was translating were trustworthy.

(3.) **Volition.** If the evidence available to the intellect seems sufficient, and the emotions experienced are supportive, then the will, as a balance scale, tips toward confident trust in the object of faith. If evidence for support is weak or there is intellectual doubt or emotional distrust, either the decision will be against trust or there will be a search for better understanding. Doubt is not unbelief. Doubt indicates a better understanding is needed.

(4.) When faith is established, the better the faith object is understood, the stronger faith will be and the more it will promote action. Comfort in making a large deposit in a bank depends on what you know about its past trustworthiness, and how stable it has been.

Understanding God’s character and His promises helps holding steadfast to faith in Him. When times are dark, or doubt is strong, the brightness of God and His promises are treasures to the believer’s heart.

**The Role of Intellect, Emotions, and Will in Natural Faith:** Natural faith is part of God’s common grace bestowed on all people, believers and unbelievers alike. Objects of natural faith include people, things, ideas, and events. Risk-taking means committing to action before knowing the outcome of that action. Thus, all actions are risk-taking. Level of risk varies with the action. We may feel confident we know what an action’s outcome will be, but we never know with certainty.

Natural faith enables people to live life in the face of the unknown future without being stymied by fear of what might happen. Through natural faith, we trust people’s honesty, safety of our vehicles, reliability of bridges, and safety of medicine. We do potentially dangerous things – climbing mountains, hang gliding, and skiing.

Consider a simple example which shows how intellect, emotions, volition, and memory are involved in decisions. Suppose you touch a hot object and burn your finger. Your intellect connects the touching of a hot object with pain. A memory is recorded that says touching hot objects hurts. The next time you encounter a hot object, your memory says don’t touch it, your intellect says if you do it will hurt, your

emotions say I don't want to be hurt, and your volition says I'm not going to touch it. Of course it all happens in an instant without conscious focus on the issue.

(1.) The **intellectual element** of natural faith is the sum of knowledge available at decision time. Suppose I am seriously considered accepting a job with company X. The interview with the company went well. Objectively everything I saw and heard seemed to indicate the company is reliable, honest, and capable.

(2.) The **emotional aspect** of natural faith is how I feel about what is known about the object to be trusted. In the example we are considering, suppose I know and trust several people who work at company X. They uniformly tell me it is a good place to work. I feel comfortable with their statements.

(3.) The **volitional element** of natural faith is willful commitment to action. It involves the whole person deciding. In the Company X example, both intellectual and emotional information supports a positive decision. At decision time, objective data looks good. People who work there believe it is a good place to work. Believing good things about Company X and feeling good about what is known, my decision, based on inclinations and desires at the time of decision, is to accept the job.

**The Role of Intellect, Emotions, and Will in Believer's Faith:** As we have seen, believer's faith is part of the saving grace of God. Faith's object is God.

John Calvin (**Institutes of the Christian Religion**) talks about faith in God as recognizing His benevolence toward us and knowing His truth as revealed to our intellect and approved by our heart. *"We shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise of Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit."*

(1.) The intellectual component of Biblical faith is knowledge of the truth of God's character, His actions, the Bible, and His promises, including the gospel.

(2.) The emotional element of Biblical faith is our heart response. It is a strong desire for God, a feeling of reverence and awe, a feeling of being loved and cared for. Calvin says, *"It now remains to pour into the heart what the mind has absorbed. For the Word of God is not received by faith if it flits about in the top of the brain, but when it takes root in the depth of the heart that it may be an invincible defense to withstand and drive off all the stratagems of temptation."*

(3.) The volitional element of believer's faith is willful commitment to trust God. It means willfully casting yourself upon Christ, believing His promises, and accepting His finished work on your behalf. It is saying with doubting Thomas in John 20:28, "*My Lord and my God!*"

From the Bible we know that in the natural fallen state, all are spiritually dead in transgressions and sins. We are all rightful objects of God's wrath. In spite of this dark picture, God reached down to save us through the work of his Son, Jesus Christ. Salvation is all of grace. God provided salvation for us when we were yet sinners.

**One Final Point on Decision-Making:** Training can override normal inclinations. Military training is an example. Consider a soldier in battle. Normal inclinations would be to make decisions which protect oneself. To enable accomplishing mission goals, training overriding such inclinations. There is much more to be said on this topic, but it is outside our present scope.

**What next?** In Part 4 we will look at three interlinked meanings of purpose, begin to look at some specifics on behavior, and consider some other points about making decisions.