Leader's Guide for Group Discussion

What is in view

As we have moved through Galatians 2 and begun Galatians 3, we encounter the idea of "faith" or "believing." Paul makes it clear that this Gospel life he writes about is cultivated in "faith." But just what does he mean by "faith" or "believing?" That's our topic this time.

What is helpful to note

Depending on the translation you are reading from, you will find a mixture of "faith" and "believe" words in Galatians 3:1-9. Both of those words share the same Greek root; they are speaking of the same thing.

This Greek word appears in the following passages (NASB):
  3:2: ". . . or by hearing with *faith*?"
  3:5: ". . . or by hearing with *faith*?"
  3:6: "Even so Abraham *believed* God . . ."
  3:7: ". . . those who are of *faith* . . ."
  3:8: ". . . justify the Gentiles by *faith* . . ."
  3:9: ". . . those who are of *faith* . . ."
  3:9: ". . . Abraham, the *believer* . . ."

Paul is affirming that acceptance before God is not based on "doing works" but is solely on the basis of grace through faith; that is, *believing God* rather than *working for God.* This is so critical; we need to make sure that we understand "faith."

Sometimes we use "faith language" to speak about something that falls short of the kind of faith Paul speaks of. For example:
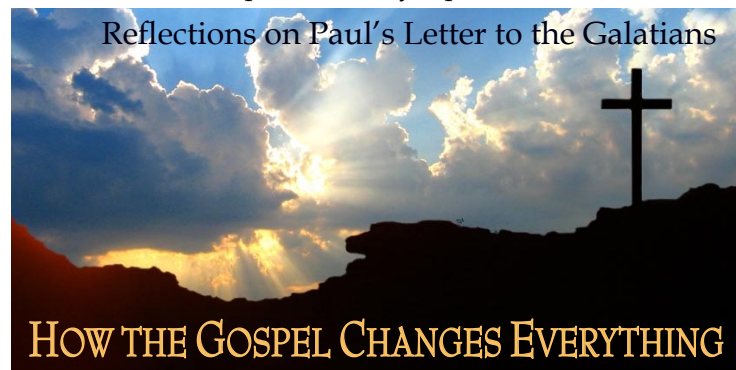 We say "I *believe* that." What we mean is "I think that's true."
 We say "I *believe* you." What we mean is "I think you are telling the truth."
 We say "I *believe in* you." What we mean is "I'm really pulling for you, I know you can do it."
But none of those expressions fully captures Paul's idea.

> *"For Paul, faith is not a 'new law,' a new stipulation for man to fulfill, by means of which to earn privilege with God: it is precisely the letting go of every human pretension as a grounds for salvation."*
> Herman Ridderbos

Reflections on Paul's Letter to the Galatians

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Notice again that Paul's contrast is between *doing* (that is, living by rules we follow) and *believing*. Clearly believing or faith does have some *content* portion; that is, to *believe* Biblically would mean I do have some grasp of what is true. It also can include an *affirmation* portion; that is, to *believe* in the Biblical sense would mean I do approvingly give my support to the truths I say I believe. But there is more.

Paul presents Abraham to us as *the* example of Biblical faith. Abraham undoubtedly accepted as true what God had told him and He also affirmed that God was reliable. But Abraham went one further; Abraham *personally trusted* God. That is where Biblical faith leads; it is a conscious, willing dependence on God Himself.

The Galatians heard the Gospel from Paul. They *believed* it in the sense that they accepted what was said as truths. They also *believed* Paul in the sense that they affirmed that he was a trustworthy messenger. But then they also, like Abraham, *believed God* in the sense that they then chose to personally trust God to do what He said He would in their lives through the work of Christ Jesus. To genuinely "believe," in a Biblical sense, means to rest in, rely on, depend on, trust in the object of faith

What to talk about with your group

Your group discussion will be helped along if you can help your people recognize that "faith" and "believe" words are built on the same root; they are speaking of the same thing. But then, through the questions, you will need to help them see that we sometimes use "faith/believe language" in a way that doesn't fully square with the Bible's view.

In one sense, we could say that the opposite of "faith" is "depending on yourself" (resulting in a life rooted in "rule living" or "works"). Faith is really about "depending on God" (resulting in a life rooted in "hearing by faith").

The example of Abraham helps us see that his "believing" went beyond affirming truths or approving God but pressed all the way into *fully relying on and personally trusting God Himself.* That is not only the doorway into life with God, it is the only grounds for on-going life with Him. We stop resting in our labor (works) and we rest wholly and fully in who He is and what He does (faith). Abraham abandoned himself in personal trust to God Himself. And, in that, he experienced the life God intended. And so can we.

> *Biblically, "faith is not just a belief in facts but a personal trust in Jesus to save me."*
> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*

Questions for Reflection and for Group Discussion

Thinking . . .

What synonyms are used for "faith"? What other words do we use when we speak about "faith" to explain or highlight what we mean?

What is the difference between saying "I believe that" or "I believe you" and how you understand what the Bible means when it speaks of "believing God"?

Reflecting . . .

Critical to Paul's understanding of the Good News of the Gospel is his view of "faith." In Galatians 3:1-9, the word comes up often; seven times in nine verses (although sometimes rendered "believe"). Drawing on what Paul writes in those verses, answer the following questions:

What is the opposite of "faith" or "believing"?

What kinds of things might come close but still fall short of truly "believing" the way Paul pictures faith?

Paul presents Abraham as *the* example of what it means to "believe" or "have faith." Drawing on what you know of Abraham's adventure with God (feel free to turn back to Genesis 15:1-6 for the episode Paul refers to), what does it mean to say that "Abraham believed God"?

Responding . . .

How do you experience, in your own life, the difference between believing God in the sense of affirming truth about Him or agreeing with what He says and believing God in the sense of abandoning yourself to Him in trust?

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