

Shorter Catechism 86
Numbers 21
Psalm 78:1-22 (st. 1-9)
Philippians 3

“What Is Faith?”

September 22, 2013

Q. 86. What is faith in Jesus Christ?

A. Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel.

That’s a good definition.

But what does it mean?

What does faith look like in practice?

This is part of why God gave us stories.

In Numbers 21 we hear a story that helps us understand what faith is.

1) A Saving Grace (Numbers 21)

In Numbers 21, we heard the story of the bronze serpent.

Sunday evenings we are beginning a new series on the book of Numbers –
or perhaps better, “the book of the Wilderness.”

In Numbers 14 we are told of Israel’s great rebellion,
when they refused to believe God’s promises,
and refused to enter the Promised Land, for fear of the Canaanites.
Israel is then cursed with 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.
Chapter 21 comes in the middle of the wilderness wanderings
and tells of the first victories over the Canaanites and Amorites.

Numbers weaves together stories of victory
with stories of grumbling and complaining.
In Numbers 11 the people complained and grumbled about their misfortunes,
and the fire of the LORD burned many in Israel.
In Numbers 12 Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses,
and Miriam was struck with leprosy
In Numbers 14 the 10 spies lead a revolt,
and the Amalekites and Canaanites routed Israel’s armies.
In Numbers 16 Korah, Dathan and Abiram rebelled against Moses,
and God opened the earth to swallow up the rebels.
Then when the people grumbled against Moses and Aaron,
God struck the people with a plague and 14,700 people died in one day.
In Numbers 20, the people complained because they had no water,
and when Moses strikes the rock in anger
(rather than speak to it, as he was commanded),
he and Aaron forfeit their right to lead Israel into the promised land.

What do all of these passages have in common?

People rebel.
Judgment falls.

And Numbers 21 starts out the same way.

The people became impatient with their wandering,
and begin to grumble against God and against Moses:
“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?
For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” (21:5)

The manna may have been a novelty at first,
but now after many years of it, they long for something more flavorful!

And so, in response to the people’s grumbling, “The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people,
and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.”

Sounds familiar!

In response to their grumbling and complaining, God sends judgment.
But this time, there is more to the story.

Numbers 21 is unique.

When the people repent and come to Moses, asking for relief:
*“We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you.
Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.”* (21:7)

And so Moses prays, and God replies: (21:8-9)

*“Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole,
and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.”
So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole.
And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.*

If you would live, you must look.

God has been teaching his people that sin deserves wrath.
When they grumble against him, he brings swift retribution.
In Numbers 16, he taught them that they need a mediator to intercede for them.
(Aaron, the high priest, burning incense in the midst of the plague,
standing between life and death)

But now he teaches them not only that sin deserves death,
not only that they need a mediator (in this case, Moses) to intercede before God,
but also that they need to look in faith to the means of their salvation.

In other words, God is teaching his people that faith is a *saving grace*.

It’s not enough that there is a bronze serpent.
The objective fact that Jesus died on the cross will not, by itself, save you.
You must look and live.

You must believe the message that you have heard,
and look to him in faith.

Jesus makes this connection quite explicitly.

In John 3:14-15, Jesus says, that “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,
so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

Faith is a saving grace.

It is a gift of God that brings salvation.

As Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-9

“For by grace you have been saved through faith.

And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,
not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

Psalm 78 retells the story of Israel’s faithlessness in the wilderness.

We’ll only sing the first 9 stanzas today –

which takes us to the middle of the wilderness (where Numbers 21 leaves us).

Twice Psalm 78 highlights Israel’s unbelief:

v22 – “they did not believe in God”

v32 – “despite his wonders, they did not believe”

As Hebrews puts it – they perished because of their unbelief.

Psalm 78 itself encourages us to sing this song and teach it to our children,
so that we never forget the LORD and his mighty deeds!

Sing Psalm 78 (stanzas 1-9)

Read Philippians 3

What is faith?

Nowadays people talk a lot about faith.

Many studies have shown that “faith” is good for you.

William James was a big fan of “faith” –

he thought that if faith helped you make sense of your world,
then faith was “true” *for you*.

It didn’t make a difference what you believe –
just believe something!

You sometimes see this in studies of “faith” or “prayer” in the scientific literature.

“Studies show” –

(have you ever thought about what that means?)

What does it mean to say “studies show”?

Why do we put so much stock in what *studies show*?

Maybe we have *our faith* in the scientific study of thing.
If “studies show” – then we are likely to do it –
even though we *know* that 20 years ago “studies showed”
that it was bad for you!

Studies are useful. Science is good!
But if your *hope* – if your *trust* – if *what you rely on*
are the results of “the latest studies” –
then you do *have faith*,
but your faith is in the wrong place.

After all, where you place your ultimate faith
is going to depend on what you think your biggest problem is!

If your faith is in the latest studies –
then “to escape the wrath and curse of the human condition,
science requires faith in the scientific method,
repentance from all unproven theories,
with the diligent use of all the outward means
whereby science communicates to us the benefits of our studies.”
Oh, and by the way, you are still going to die!

Faith in general cannot save you.

What is our biggest problem?
Our biggest problem is that we have sinned against a holy God.
How do we know that this is a problem?
Because everyone dies!

Last time we looked at the question,
“What does God require of us that we may escape his wrath and curse due to us for sin?”
To escape the wrath and curse of God due to us for sin,
God requires of us faith in Jesus Christ, repentance unto life,
with the diligent use of all the outward means
whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption.

The question is not “what is faith – *in general*?”
but what is *faith in Jesus Christ*?

2) Receiving and Resting upon Him Alone for Salvation (Philippians 3:1-6)

Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation.
God was teaching Israel in Num 21 that they could not look to themselves for salvation,
they had to look to another.

And this is at the heart of what Paul is doing in Philippians 3.

a. Where Is Your Confidence? (3:1-3)

3:1 Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. 2 Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. 3 For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—

Paul starts by calling us to rejoice in the Lord
and not put our confidence in the flesh.

What does it mean to rejoice in the Lord?

Well, it means to find your joy in him.

If you are going to find your joy in the Lord,

then you need to beware of everything else that used to be your source of joy.

What does this look like?

Clair Davis suggests:

“Could it go like this?

As you drop off to sleep, call on the Lord to wake you up within the joy of the Lord.

As you wake up enjoy his presence, and then review the upcoming day with him and say,

I think I can predict unbelief in that spot,

shield me Lord, and open my heart to see what you can do then.

I pray this honestly as you continue to work that honesty in me,

and I know myself by your grace.

This is who I am and I’m tempted to do this and say that this afternoon.

But Lord I love you so much, hear Jesus intercede for me now,

shield me from the denial I will be so tempted to.

Know yourself as the Lord shows you.

Value his presence, reject his absence, trust Jesus and love him with all your heart.”

Look at how Paul says it.

Paul had once found his joy and confidence in his Jewish identity.

His faith was in his Jewishness – which he had confused with faith in God.

I realize that you are probably not tempted to become Jewish.

So, as you listen to what Paul says about *his* old temptation,

insert whatever your old temptation is!

Paul uses three terms for these people:

1 “dogs” – this is not just an insult.

Today, if you call someone a dog, you are just being mean.

In Paul's day, if a Jew calls someone a dog, he is calling them a Gentile.
Think of Mark 7:27, when Jesus called the Syro-Phoenician woman a dog.
He wasn't insulting her – and she didn't take it as an insult.
He was saying, "You're a Gentile" and she agreed "I'm a dog."
Gentiles are called "dogs" because they are outside the covenant community.

Now Paul says that these Jews he is warning against are "dogs" –
they are outside God's covenant community – they are ritually unclean.

- 2 "evildoers" – the phrase does not refer simply to "people who do bad things,"
but more particularly it is "workers of evil."
These Jewish leaders claim to do the "works of the law" –
but in fact, Paul says, they do works of evil.
- 3 "those who mutilate the flesh" – actually this is one word in the Greek
"the mutilation" – watch out for the mutilation! (katatome)
The word for circumcision is "peritome" (v3).
The Judaizers were sometimes called the "peritome" – the circumcision.
But Paul says that they are not "circumcisers" –
they are mutilators!
When Jewish Christians require Gentile converts to be circumcised,
they are no longer "the circumcision" – they are "the mutilation"!
They are no better than the barbaric customs of the pagans.

The Judaizers, in Paul's view,
are "dogs" "evildoers" "the mutilation"

And in contrast, Paul says that *we* are the circumcision.
In verse 3 he explains what it means to *be* the circumcision:

It is instructive that Paul refers to "us" as the circumcision.
He was often accused of rejecting the OT –
but Paul argues that the church is the true fulfillment of the OT.
Paul is not saying that the NT church is a parenthesis.
He is not saying that the NT church is something new and different
from the OT people of God.
He is saying that *we are the circumcision*.
We are the continuing people of God.
The Jews as well as the Judaizers *are not* the people of God.
And it is not as though the church has *replaced* Israel.
The church *is* Israel.

And even as there were three things to watch out for –

three things that identify the “mutilation” – (katatome)
there are also three things that identify the circumcision (peritome):

- 1 “who worship by the Spirit of God” -
this is what Jesus says in John 4:23-24,
that true worshipers will “worship in the Spirit and in truth.”
This is not talking about “internal” vs. “external.”
Neither Jesus nor Paul wants to divide the inward from the outward.
Rather, they are talking about the eschatological significance
of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.
“The coming of Christ...has ushered in the new age of salvation,
and the Holy Spirit is the sign of this redemption.
Those who belong to Christ are part of the new order (2 Cor. 5:17);
they have the Spirit and are thus able to offer worship
that is pleasing to God.” (Silva, 171).

Why does Paul put this first?

Because this is what the prophets had said would characterize the people of God.
God had said in Ezekiel 36 that he would take away their hearts of stone
and give them hearts of flesh – that he would give them his Spirit.
He had promised in Joel 2 that he would pour out his Spirit on all flesh.

The outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost
was the fulfillment of what God had promised.

The outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost
demonstrates that Jesus has ascended to the right hand of the Father
and has sat down on the throne of his father David.

And therefore, those who worship by the Holy Spirit (or “in” the Holy Spirit)
are the circumcision.

- 2 “who glory in Christ Jesus” – or perhaps better, “who boast in Christ Jesus”

And this is closely related to point 3

- 3 “who put no confidence in the flesh”
The “mutilation” puts their confidence in the flesh.
They boast that they are descended from Abraham.
Their confidence is in their fleshly circumcision.

But the true circumcision does not put confidence in the flesh –
rather, the true circumcision glories in Christ Jesus –
because faith does not look at what *I* have done –
faith looks at Jesus – faith boasts in what *Jesus* has done.

b. Reasons for Confidence in the Flesh (3:4-6)

And then in verses 4-6, Paul uses himself as an example.

4 though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more:

Paul gives four reasons for his confidence in the flesh:

- 1) *circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews;*

The first focuses on his birth heritage –

Saul of Tarsus had an excellent pedigree.

The last phrase “Hebrew of Hebrews” indicates

that his family did not belong to the “compromising” Hellenizers, but were among the “faithful” Hebrews.

Paul is pointing out that if you want to boast in pedigree, he can “boast” with the best of them.

- 2) *as to the law, a Pharisee;*

You must remember that “Pharisee” was a term of respect and praise.

Today we often speak of the Pharisees as legalists and hypocrites,

but in Paul’s day, the Pharisees were the pinnacle of religious achievement

The Pharisees were the orthodox party – the godly folks –

those who took the law seriously and sought to obey it.

- 3) *as to zeal, a persecutor of the church;*

No one was more zealous for the purity of Jerusalem than Saul of Tarsus.

Again, today we view this as a black mark on his record,

but you have to remember that God had judged Israel

for their failure to deal with those who turned away from him.

And so when Saul of Tarsus saw the early Christians,

he saw a group who was abandoning the Law of God!

His zeal for the LORD was demonstrated by his persecuting the church.

- 4) *as to righteousness under the law, blameless.*

The word “blameless” never means “sinless” –

no Jew would have claimed absolute moral perfection before God.

Besides, Paul is not talking about his conscience here,

he is talking about his *credentials*.

The point is that anyone could check up on Paul.

Paul is saying – go back to Tarsus, Jerusalem, Damascus, and inquire of anyone:

you will find that my observance of the Law was spotless.
This is just a standard way of describing a faithful and observant Jew.
Zachariah and Elizabeth are described as “blameless” in Luke 1:6.

The righteousness under the law of which Paul speaks
is an observable, demonstrable righteousness –
it is a way of life prescribed by God.

But this is not *just* a way of talking about Jews under the OT law!
Paul told the Philippians in 2:15 that they should be “blameless and pure”
before the watching world.
Blamelessness, then, is a *good thing*.

Rather, the reason why Paul will repudiate his “blamelessness” *before the Law*
is because the righteousness that comes from the law is not worth comparing
with the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ.

Notice that Paul is *not* saying that there is *no* righteousness that comes from the law.
You can be blameless before the law!
You can attain to all that the law prescribes!
And then what do you have?

Nothing!

Because the righteousness that comes from the law could never give life!
Paul explains that in Galatians 3.
If a law had been given that could give life,
then righteousness would indeed be by the law. (3:21)
The law was our guardian until Christ came,
in order that we might be justified by faith (3:24)

The reason why we needed Christ was because the Law could not bring life!
We needed a new covenant, because the blood of bulls and goats,
prescribed in the first covenant, could not remove sin.

And that is why Paul repudiates that “blamelessness” –
that righteousness that he had through the law.

Faith receives Christ and rests upon Christ.
Your eyes are lifted to another.
Your hope is not in yourself, but in the one who has done great things in the past,
and has promised that he will act again.

3) As He Is Offered in the Gospel (Philippians 3:7-11)

Because Faith is not only a saving grace.

It is not only a saving grace whereby we receive and rest upon Christ alone for salvation,
but it is a saving grace whereby we receive and rest upon Christ alone
for salvation, *as he is offered to us in the Gospel.*

7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

And now Paul says, “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth
of knowing Christ Jesus my LORD.”

Paul says that if you are going to rejoice in the Lord –
if you are going to have confidence in the gospel –
then you need to *know Christ.*

You need to get your theology straight.

If you are going to avoid the perils of the Judaizers,
and if you are going to have the mind of *Christ* –
then you need to *know* Christ Jesus my Lord.

Now, when I say that you need to know your theology,
I don’t mean that you need to stuff your head with propositions.

But you must understand who Jesus is!

You must understand what Paul has said in Philippians 2:5-11.

You must understand that though he was in the form of God,
he did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped.

The eternal Son of God humbled himself and came in the form of a servant.

In the incarnation, God took to himself human flesh,
and atoned for our sins with his precious blood.

The language of Philippians 2:1-11 runs throughout 3:7-10.

The word “count” (hegeomai) was used in 2:3

“*count* others more significant than yourselves”
as well as 2:6

“he did not *count* equality with God a thing to be grasped.”

Paul now uses it here in 3:7

“I *counted* [these things] as loss”
and v8

“I *count* everything as loss.”

In other words, Paul is now acting in the imitation of Christ.

Faith clings to Christ!

Likewise “form” (morphe) was used in 2:6 – the “form” of God,
and 2:7 “the form of a servant” –
and Paul uses the same root in 3:10
when he says that he wants to be “conformed” to Christ’s death.

Likewise, in 2:7 Paul said that Christ was “found” as a man –
and in 3:9 he says that he wants to “be found in Christ”.

And in 2:11 Paul said that every tongue would confess that Jesus Christ is Lord –
Well, in 3:8, Paul confesses that Jesus Christ is “my” Lord.

And if all these verbal parallels were insufficient,
Paul structures 3:7-10 around the same pattern of renunciation of past privilege,
followed by humiliation and death, leading to resurrection and exaltation.

Paul had said in chapter 2 that we are to have the mind of Christ.
Now he shows us in chapter 3 what it looks like to have the mind of Christ –
it means to renounce our past privilege,
and to endure the cross,
all so that we might become conformed to his resurrection glory.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish,
“rubbish” is too polite a word here – (skubala)
even dung falls short – since this is not the word used in most agricultural settings
crap or shit would work far better,
since the only question is whether Paul’s point is that these things are revolting,
or simply worthless.

It is not that Paul thinks that his Jewish heritage was all that awful in itself –
only that in comparison to Christ, everything else is worthless/revolting.

Why?

in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Nothing else matters to me.

in order that I may gain Christ, and be found in him,

You can see here the principle articulated by Athanasius:

Christ became all that we are by nature
so that we might become all that he is by grace.
Christ was found in human form,
so that we might be found in him.

This is the basic underlying principle of union with Christ
that you find all throughout Paul's epistles.

And then there are three things that Paul sees flowing out of this:

1) justification (v9), 2) sanctification (v10), and 3) glorification (v11)

1 *not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law,
but that which comes through faith in Christ,
the righteousness from God that depends on faith*

Note the verb: "having" a righteousness.

Paul says that to be found "in Christ" –
to be united to Christ –

means that you do not have a righteousness that comes from the law,
but rather you *have* a righteousness which comes through faith in Christ.

The central point in verse 9 is that as we are found in Christ
we *have* "a righteousness which comes through faith in Christ –
the righteousness of God that depends on faith."

And here it becomes abundantly clear that for Paul
the righteousness of God is not describing the righteousness
whereby God himself is righteous,
but rather the righteousness which we "have" by faith.

When I am found in Christ – when I am united to him –
I have a righteousness from God that depends on faith.

Paul here does not get into the whole discussion of imputation
(that is more central to his discussion in Romans and Galatians).

What he does show is that "union with the resurrected Christ by faith...
is the central motif of Paul's applied soteriology" (Gaffin, 132),
and that justification is the first thing that Paul thinks of
as one of the benefits of that union.

But the second thing that Paul thinks of as connected with our union with Christ is sanctification.

2 *that I may know him and the power of his resurrection,
and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,*

Sanctification involves three things that Paul wants to know:

- 1) “him” – I want to know Christ – himself.

This reminds us that we are not just talking about a moralistic

“I want to be a better person”

I want to know *Christ* – I want to know *him*.

If that is not the first thing that you want to know,
then you need to rethink your priorities!

And if Christ is the first thing for you –

how are demonstrating this in your daily life?

Is he really first?

Well, what does it mean to know Christ?

The next two things help us:

- 2) “I want to know the power of his resurrection”

Throughout Philippians Paul emphasizes the *knowledge*
that is essential for our sanctification

Sanctification is a profoundly *doctrinal, theological* process.

You will *never* grow in grace, if you are not growing in knowledge.

Of course, there is always the opposite problem –

of people who are always studying and never doing –

but my observation is that those who are seeking to know Christ
in the manner that Paul describes here

are invariably the most active Christians in the church.

Because knowing the power of Christ’s resurrection

is nothing less than experiencing the work of the Holy Spirit –
who is, after all,

the presence of the resurrected Christ with his people.

The resurrected Lord has poured out his Spirit on his church –

and therefore the power of the exalted Messiah is at work in you.

- 3) “I want to know the fellowship of his sufferings”

This comes about first in our baptism –

as we participate in the death and burial of Christ.

As he identified with us in his incarnation,

we identify with him – we are united with his death –
in our baptism.

But this definitive breach with sin

then is worked out throughout the life of the believer.

“becoming like him in his death.”

3 *that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*
Verse 11 then emphasizes our “final” sanctification in glorification.

Paul is emphasizing the need for perseverance.

Your present status in Christ does not remove or reduce your need to persevere.

The only way to glory is the way of the cross.

Knowing the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings
and being conformed to the likeness of his death
is the only way to glory.

After all, if Paul has come this far, refusing to have confidence in himself
and his own righteousness,

then how could he have confidence in his own efforts at sanctification?

His only hope is Christ –

and so he wants to keep his confidence fixed there!

Q. 86. What is faith in Jesus Christ?

A. Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel.