

## Lesson 3

# How James Defined Faith

## *A Look at James 2*

### Introduction

Understanding faith has always been complex, often complicated by our limited knowledge of the original Greek language. For centuries, the Restoration Movement has grappled with the dichotomy of faith and works, frequently presenting them as mutually exclusive. This struggle is like the challenges faced by Martin Luther 500 years ago. Luther, unable to reconcile the role of actions in salvation, concluded that the book of James was uninspired, advocating that salvation is solely by God's grace without human action. Conversely, some within the Restoration Movement have overemphasized the role of works in salvation. Both perspectives miss the essential truth: we are saved by grace through faith.

The crux of the issue lies in our understanding of faith. This study aims to delve into the original Greek word for faith, "pistis," to uncover its deeper meaning and how it applies to our lives. By exploring passages such as James 2:17, we will see that faith in the early church context was more than mere belief—it was a pledge of covenant loyalty akin to a wedding vow or a pledge of allegiance. This interpretation highlights the profound commitment and relational trust that "pistis" entails, a concept often lost in modern translations.

The problem is our understanding of faith.

### A Look at the Greek Word for Faith

To better understand "faith," let's return to the original language and discover the deeper definition of Biblical faith. We'll use the word for faith found in James 2:17: *pistis*. We will learn how James makes a statement on genuine faith instead of launching a debate on faith versus works.

In most translations, "pistis" is rendered as "faith," but a more accurate interpretation might be a "vow" to a faithful relationship, reflecting its original meaning in the early church. The term can be best understood as a pledge rooted in covenant loyalty. Therefore, it aligns closely with the idea of a covenant, akin to a wedding vow or a pledge of allegiance. For clarity, "faithful relationship" or "covenant loyalty" can be added to emphasize its essence, addressing the common misunderstandings among English speakers.

In English, we typically equate "faith" with "belief," assuming this is the intended meaning, but this interpretation is not consistently applied. For example, there are instances in scripture where "pistis" refers to God's actions. English translators never translate it as "faith" because God does not require faith in the sense of belief. Instead, they translate it as "faithfulness." Similarly, in passages like Romans 3:22, where "pistis" refers to Jesus, translators again opt for "faithfulness." This inconsistency arises because, when "faith" does not suit their narrative, translators use "faithfulness," but when it does, they revert to "faith." This approach leads to a significant inconsistency in translation.

"Faithfulness" is a closer understanding of the word "pistis," but it is still not the most accurate. Unlike today, where faith or belief can be contentious issues due to the presence of atheists and agnostics, this was not a concern during the time the scriptures were written. Back then, nearly everyone believed in supernatural beings and worshiped their gods. Understanding "pistis" as a vow to faithfulness or covenant loyalty highlights its significance in that cultural context. Declaring Jesus as Lord and King, excluding all other gods, represented a profound shift in allegiance. It signified a commitment to the one true God of Israel, pledging loyalty to His anointed King Jesus and His coming Kingdom.

This change of allegiance often resulted in excommunication from family, friends, and society. A modern parallel is how Muslims might be treated by their family and community if they convert to Christianity. In the first century, most people worshiped their gods, and shifting allegiance to be faithful solely to the one true God was a significant source of trouble and persecution. This is why "pistis" (pledging covenant loyalty and faithfulness) was crucial. It signified being recognized by God as His and having the right relationship with Him. However, it also carried significant social consequences for the convert.

Now, let's consider the word "pistis" in its possessive form, "pisteos." In most translations, it is rendered simply as "faith." However, it should instead be "one's commitment to faithfulness." This implies maintaining continuous faithfulness or loyalty to an already established covenantal relationship. This interpretation aligns more closely with its meaning in the early church. While it can be translated as "one's faithfulness" or "covenant loyalty," adding "commitment" provides emphasis and clarity, addressing the widespread misunderstanding of the word in English.

Finally, let's consider the verb form of "faith," *pisteuó*. In most translations, this is "believing" or simply "belief." However, in the early church, it signified more than acknowledging something as accurate or mentally agreeing with a concept, which is the typical meaning of "belief" in English. Instead, it encompassed actual trust within a personal relationship, akin to a relational covenant—implying confidence and actions based on that relationship. The word could have been translated as "trust" or "rely" (in the active sense) and often should be understood in context as to whom or what is being trusted.

## Conclusion

Understanding faith has been challenging due to limited knowledge of the original Greek. Over the last 250 years, the Restoration Movement has often presented faith and works as distinct and opposing concepts. This mirrors Martin Luther's struggle 500 years ago with the book of James, leading him to deem it uninspired because he couldn't reconcile the role of actions in salvation. He concluded that salvation is solely by God's grace, independent of human action. Conversely, many in the Restoration Movement have emphasized actions as the means of salvation. Both views miss the mark; we are saved by grace through faith.

The core issue lies in our understanding of faith. By examining the Greek word "pistis," particularly in James 2:17, we see that faith in the early church context was more than mere belief—it was a vow to a faithful relationship or covenant loyalty. This understanding aligns more closely with a pledge or commitment, akin to a wedding vow or pledge of allegiance.

Understanding "pistis" in its original context as a commitment to covenant faithfulness provides a more accurate and meaningful interpretation, bridging the gap between belief and action in our spiritual life.

## For Discussion

1. How does understanding "pistis" as a vow to faithfulness or covenant loyalty changes our interpretation of key biblical passages? Can you provide specific examples where this interpretation offers a deeper or different meaning than the traditional translation of "faith"?
2. How do the early church's cultural and religious contexts influence our modern understanding of faith? How might this historical perspective help resolve the perceived conflict between faith and works in contemporary Christian theology?
3. Considering the social consequences faced by early Christians for their commitment to Jesus, how should we view and live out our faith in environments that may be hostile or indifferent to our beliefs? How can we draw parallels between the early church's experiences and today's challenges?