

Faith - Πιστις

Is Not Something You Do; It is What God Has Already Done.

Faith is one of the most theologically charged concepts in the NT. The most common word for this concept is πίστις (*pistis*, “faith”), which can express two aspects of faith: “trust, belief” and “faithfulness.”

The Greek word translated as “faith” in your New Testament is πίστις (*pistis*), derived from the verb πειθω (*peithō*), meaning “to persuade” or “to convince.” *Pistis* denotes not merely intellectual belief but a firm commitment. It does not mean “to believe;” it never did. For 2,000 years, the English-speaking church has handed you a translation that strips the word of its living nerve. What you received instead was a pale substitute, making faith sound like an opinion you hold about God rather than a force that moves through you like oxygen through blood.

The scholars knew the manuscripts preserved the original intact. Somewhere between the ancient papyrus and the English printing press, the most important word in Paul's entire theological vocabulary was quietly and irreversibly domesticated. You have heard this your whole life. Faith, you were told, is believing in things you cannot see. Faith is trusting God even when the evidence seems to say otherwise. Faith is the decision you make on Sunday morning to accept a set of doctrines as true, to nod your head when the creed is recited, and to hold your convictions steady when the world presses back against them.

Faith, in the version most of us received, is essentially confidence. It is the spiritual equivalent of optimism, a posture of mind that assumes God is real, that his promises will hold, and that the resurrection happened and continues to matter. You were taught to cultivate it like a muscle. You were told that when you have enough of it, mountains move, prayers are answered, and your life begins to align with something larger than yourself. Some of you heard it described as a gift, poured into you at the moment of conversion, present in degrees, something you could increase through prayer, scripture, and community. You sat in pews and listened to sermons about faith being like a seed, like a mustard seed, small but sufficient. You were encouraged to exercise it, step out in it, and declare it over your circumstances.

Some of you heard it weaponized, turned back on you in your darkest moments as a verdict, “You just need more faith.” As if your cancer, your bankruptcy, your child's addiction, or your silence from heaven were the result of insufficient belief. As if the measuring cup of your conviction were simply not full enough. And the gap between your suffering and your relief was exactly the same as the gap between your current faith and the faith you were supposed to have.

The word became a burden rather than a living thing. It became the label for your inadequacy. Some of you left the church; others stayed and quietly carried the weight of your doubt as a shameful secret. Some of you performed the faith because the community needed you to, because your family expected it, or because you genuinely did not know what else to do with the longing beneath all the effort. And some of you are reading this right now because something still pulls at you. It's not the doctrine or the institution, but something beneath both that you have never been able to fully name.

The traditional reading is not *entirely* wrong. There is something correct about it. The instinct that faith involves trust, that it involves leaning into something invisible, points to a real phenomenon. The teachers who gave you this version were not lying to you. They gave you what they had been taught to give you. However, that rendering is incomplete.

The word the writers of the New Testament used is *pistis*, a 2,000-year-old Greek term they deliberately chose, specifically over every other available word in the richest philosophical language the ancient Western world had ever produced. It appears 243 times in the Greek New Testament. It is the backbone of Pauline theology. The word Paul reaches for more than any other when he tries to describe the core of what has happened to human beings in the wake of Christ.

It is the word in the Sermon on the Mount. It is the word in Hebrews 11:1, the famous definition verse that every Sunday school teacher in the English-speaking world has quoted. The King James version reads, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." And almost every time *pistis* appears across those 243 occurrences, your English Bible renders it with one word, faith. That word has done enormous damage. Not because the translators were careless, but because the English word faith does not share the same center of gravity as the Greek word *pistis*. And the difference between those two centers of gravity changes everything about what Paul was trying to tell you.

This is what *pistis* actually means: according to Thayer's Greek Lexicon, one of the foundational scholarly references for New Testament Greek, compiled by Joseph Henry and published in 1889 after decades of painstaking philological work, "conviction of the truth of anything," and "a conviction or belief respecting man's relationship to God and divine things generally with the included idea of trust and holy fervor born of faith and joined with it." That is the standard academic definition, and it sounds, honestly, fairly close to what your pastor told you.

Conviction, belief, trust, not far from the Sunday morning version. But that is just the surface. Go deeper. In the Old Testament, the concept of faith is often expressed by the Hebrew words *אֱמֶת* (*'emet*, "faithfulness"), *בָּטַח* (*batāḥ*, "to trust"), *אֱמוּנָה* (*'emûnâ*, "faithfulness"), and *אָמֵן* (*'āman*, "to believe"). In the Septuagint, the concept of faith is expressed by *ἀλήθεια* (*alētheia*, "loyalty"), *δικαιοσύνη* (*dikaïosynē*, "righteousness"), and *πίστις* (*pistis*, "faith").

The literature goes further, and this is where the conventional translation begins to crack along its seams. Lexham Theological Wordbook defines *pistis* as "the assurance confirming that the

things hoped for by this faith are well-founded and trustworthy.” God’s divine persuasion is therefore distinct from human belief and faith, yet it involves them. The Lord continually births faith in the yielded believer so they can know what he prefers (i.e., the persuasion of his will). It’s not your persuasion, nor the persuasion you build through spiritual discipline. The persuasion that originates in God and moves toward you.

Pistis, in its root sense, describes something done *to* you, not something *you* do. You are persuaded [music] into it by something that encounters you. The Romans had the cognate word *fides*, from which we derive fidelity, confidence, and infidel. In Roman civic life, *fides* was a weighty term. It described the mutual pledge between two parties in a covenant, the loyalty bond that held Roman society together, and the sworn oath between patron and client, general and soldier, and husband and wife. *Fides* was not a state of mind you had about someone. It was a living, enacted relationship. It was something two parties held between them, something that could be honored or violated, maintained or broken.

The Roman goddess Phidis was among the oldest in the Roman pantheon, older than Jupiter in some traditions, because the Romans understood that the foundation of all civilization was the kept word, the honored pledge, and the mutual fidelity that made human community possible.

When Jerome translated the Greek New Testament into Latin in the late 4th century, producing what we now call the Vulgate, he completed his work in approximately 382 A.D. in Bethlehem, under the patronage of Pope Domicus I. He rendered “*pistis*” as “*fides*,” the correct choice. *Fides* carried the relational weight. It implied covenant loyalty, mutual obligation, and the living pledge between persons who have staked themselves on each other. The Vulgate’s *fides* preserved the social, covenantal, relational texture of the Greek *pistis* better than any subsequent English translation.

Then centuries passed. The Latin of the Vulgate was the church’s language, and *fides* was the theologian’s word. In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas wrote about *fides* in terms that still carried its relational depth. In his *Summa Theologiae*, completed in the early 1270s, he described *fides* as the act by which the intellect ascends to divine truth under the movement of the will, itself moved by God. For Aquinas, the movement originated in God. It was not self-generated. That crucial asymmetry remained intact in Latin.

Then, in 1526, William Tyndale produced the first English New Testament. This revolutionary act led to his being strangled and burned at the stake in 1536. Tyndale chose the word *faith*, readily available. It derives from the Old French *fa*, which comes from the Latin *phis*. Etymologically, the chain was intact. But by the early 16th century in English, *faith* had already begun to migrate away from the relational, covenantal meaning of *fides* and toward something more interior, more subjective, closer to religious belief in the modern sense.

When the King James translators formed their committee in 1604 under the royal commission of James I, they met at Hampton Court and divided the text among six panels of scholars. Over the following years, they adopted Tyndale’s word “*faith*” and retained it. Every single time, all 243

occurrences of *pistis* were flattened into one English word that, by then, meant something subtly but decisively different from what the Greeks had written. The “gap” between *pistis* and faith is not a gap between two words, but a gap between two entirely different models of what happens when a human being encounters the divine.

In one model, you are the actor. You believe, you trust, you exercise, you maintain. In the other model, something acts on you, something persuades, something pledges, something moves within you from the outside. The English put you at the center. The Greek puts God there.

Origin of Alexandria, writing in the early 3rd century, around 230 A.D., in what is now Egypt, was one of the first systematic theologians to wrestle directly with *pistis* in its Greek philosophical context, and he was uniquely equipped to do so. Origin was not a provincial theologian. He was among the most educated men of the ancient world, trained in both Christian scripture and Greek philosophy, and fluent in the nuances of terms that later Latin and English readers would encounter only in translation. He had read Plato, so he knew that *pistis* appears prominently in Plato's *Republic*, written in the 4th century B.C.

Roughly 500 years before Origin, specifically in the famous passage of the divided line in Book 6, where Socrates describes four graduated states of cognitive engagement with reality. In Plato's schema, *pistis* occupies the second rung from the bottom. It is the state of perceiving visible, concrete physical things, the everyday world of objects and events. It is superior to mere image recognition but inferior to *διάνοια* (*dianoia*, mathematical reasoning) and vastly inferior to *νοῦς* (*nous*, the direct intellectual apprehension of the eternal forms).

In Plato, *pistis* is the cognitive mode of ordinary people who trust their senses and accept what appears before them without probing the deeper structure of reality. It is not exalted. It is baseline perception. Origin recognized that when the New Testament writers Paul, James, and the author of Hebrews appropriated this Platonic term and loaded it with new meaning, they were acting in a philosophically deliberate and aggressive way. They were taking a word that described a lower form of knowing in the dominant intellectual tradition of their world and inverting it, declaring that the *pistis* relationship with the living God was not lower knowing but a qualitatively different kind of knowing, one that reason cannot generate by working harder.

You cannot ascend from Platonic *pistis* to *nous* through effort and discipline. But the New Testament writers claimed that the *pistis* that encounters the living God is not on the Platonic ladder at all. It is a different kind of knowing altogether, one that comes from outside the ladder, from outside the epistemological structure that Greek philosophy assumed was the only one available.

Origins commentary on the Gospel of John, written in segments in the 220s A.D., repeatedly returns to *Pistis* with precisely this argument. He writes, "And I am rendering this from the Greek, not from a secondary source, that *pistis* in the New Testament is not the inferior perception Plato named, but rather a distinct faculty of the soul that is activated by contact with the divine *logos*. It is not blind. It is not irrational. It is a form of perception that reason cannot

produce and cannot evaluate by its own standards. Reason can only receive its fruits in retrospect.”

Origin was engaged in philosophy of religion in the 3rd century, a field most contemporary theologians have not yet caught up with, and the center of his argument was *pistis*. The thing Paul was talking about was the thing that the English word faith has never quite been capacious enough to hold. The Codex Sinaiticus is one of the earliest complete manuscripts of the Christian Bible. It is dated to the 4th century A.D., most likely produced between 330 and 360 A.D., possibly at Caesarea Maritime, though some scholars place its production in Egypt.

It is written in Greek uncial script, in capital letters with no spaces between words, on vellum made from animal skin. It contains both the Old and New Testaments, along with several early Christian texts. It is notable among scholars not only for its age but also for its corrections. The Codex Sinaiticus shows evidence of being reviewed and amended by multiple scribes during its early centuries of use, making it a living document that reflects how the earliest Christian communities engaged with their texts.

When the German scholar Lobegott Friedrich Constantin (von) Tischendorf discovered the Codex Sinaiticus at St. Catherine's monastery in the Sinai Peninsula in 1844, he famously rescued what he claimed were pages being used as fuel for the monastery's fire. Although this story is disputed, he immediately recognized that he held something of extraordinary importance. Every instance of *pistis* in that manuscript remained *pistis*. The word had not passed through the English translation funnel. It had not been reduced to faith. It sat on those pages in its original Greek power, waiting to be read by someone who understood what it meant in the context of a first-century Jewish author writing in Greek for communities scattered across the Roman Empire.

Brook Foss Wescott and Fenton John Anthony Hort, British scholars whose 1881 critical Greek text of the New Testament became the foundational apparatus for modern biblical translation, worked extensively with the Sinaiticus and related manuscripts. In his 1889 commentary on the epistle to the Hebrews, Wescott explicitly noted that *pistis* in the Pauline and Hebrews literature functions as a technical term with specific phenomenological content. He wrote that *pistis* describes not a psychological attitude but a mode of apprehension, a way of being in contact with a reality that transcends the visible. Wescott was careful not to reduce this to mere belief. He insisted that the word carried an active, relational quality of contact-making that English translations consistently failed to convey.

Augustine of Hippo, writing in North Africa in the late 4th and early fifth centuries A.D., produced his great work, the *De Trinitate*, which spans roughly 400 to 420 A.D. and grapples with *pistis* through the lens of its Latin cognate *fides*. Augustine's definition is famous. Faith is to believe what you do not yet see. The reward of this faith is to see what you believe. That sounds again like the Sunday morning version. Belief in the invisible, followed eventually by sight. But read Augustine's broader corpus, and a different picture emerges. In his *Confessions*, arguably the most psychologically honest document of the ancient world, Augustine describes the process

by which he came to faith not as a decision he made, but as a yielding he finally stopped resisting. Our heart is restless until it rests in thee. The rest is something that happens to the heart. The heart does not create its own rest. Something steals it from outside.

Martin Luther, standing in his tower in the Augustinian monastery at Wittenberg around 1515, reading Paul's letter to the Romans, had his famous breakthrough on the very phrase that contains *pistis*. He had been torturing himself with the idea of God's righteousness, terrified of a God who judged by an impossible standard. Then he read Romans 1:17, *eistios espistine*, from *pistis* to *pistis*, and something broke open. He later wrote that he felt reborn, as if he had passed through open gates into paradise. He had not decided to feel that way. He had not generated the experience through spiritual effort. It arrived. It persuaded him. And that experience, which he would eventually reshape the entire Western church around, was itself an instance of what *pistis* names.

The Greek word *pistis* describes something that acts within you, whereas the English word faith turns it into a verb you perform. The first cross-reference is Galatians 2:16. Paul is writing to the churches in Galatia, communities he had founded in what is now central Turkey, and he is angry. The letter to the Galatians shows Paul at his most urgent and theologically precise. He has heard that teachers have come to his communities after his departure and told the gentile converts that they must be circumcised and observe the Jewish law to be fully included in the covenant people of God. Paul systematically dismantles this argument.

At the center of his counterargument sits a single Greek phrase, *διὰ πίστεως* (*dia pisteōs*). In most English translations, Galatians 2:16 reads, "Knowing that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ." The phrase "*pisteōs* in Jesus Christ" is translated as "faith in Jesus Christ." And here is where a century of explosive scholarly debate erupts, because the Greek genitive construction that connects *pisteōs* to *Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦ* (*Christon Yāsou*) is grammatically ambiguous in a way that English completely flattens. The genitive in Greek can indicate possession, origin, description, or relation. *Pisteōs* can be read as an objective genitive, that is, faith directed toward Jesus Christ. This means your faith is aimed at Christ as its object. That is the traditional interpretation. Your faith in him. Your trust is directed toward him.

This is the reading that produces faith in Jesus Christ, found in virtually every English translation from Tyndale through the ESV. But the same Greek genitive can equally and grammatically be read as a subjective genitive: the faith that belongs to Jesus Christ; the faithfulness of Jesus Christ himself. Christ's own *pistis* enacted on your behalf. This reading produces the faith of Jesus Christ, meaning not your believing but his fidelity, not your trust but his pledge, not your spiritual performance but his covenant loyalty enacted in his death and resurrection.

This is not a fringe interpretation invented by progressive scholars seeking to deconstruct Paul. Richard Hayes of Duke Divinity School argued this case with full scholarly rigor in his 1983 doctrinal dissertation, later published as *The Faith of Jesus Christ, the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-41*. Hayes demonstrated, through careful analysis of the Greek syntax [music] and the broader narrative logic of Paul's argument, that in Galatians Paul primarily announces

Christ's own *pistis*, his covenant faithfulness to God, enacted through his obedience to death, as the ground of human justification.

Your *pistis* is not the cause of your justification. It is your participation in Christ's prior faithfulness. You are drawn into a *pistis* that was already operative before you decided anything, enacted in history before your faith began, and that holds you from beneath rather than being generated by you from within. The difference between these two readings is not a minor philological quibble. It is the difference between a religion centered on your performance and one centered on an act of divine fidelity that preceded and enables everything you do.

One translation makes you the source; the other makes you the recipient. One translation yields "You just need more faith." The other is the version Paul actually wrote. The second cross-reference is Hebrews 11:1. This one is worth spending time with because it is the verse most consistently cited as the definition of faith in English-speaking Christianity. The King James reads, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." It is a beautiful sentence, with the cadence of a definition and the authority of a maxim.

People have put it on wall plaques, coffee mugs, and embroidered it on throw pillows. Yet it rests on a translation that misses something essential. The Greek is Ἔστιν δὲ πίστις ἐλπιζομένων ὑπόστασις, πραγμάτων ἔλεγχος οὐ βλεπομένων (*estin de pistos elpizomenōn hypostasis pragmatōn elegchos ou blepomenōn*). Let us examine this word by word, because the author of Hebrews (whoever that author was is a matter of considerable scholarly debate) chose each word with extraordinary precision. Hypostasis is translated as "substance" in the King James, "confidence" in some modern translations, and "assurance" in others.

In Greek philosophy and theology, hypostasis denotes the underlying reality, the actual foundation beneath appearances, the essential being of a thing as distinct from its phenomenal expression. In the Nicene Creed, hypostasis is used to describe the three persons of the Trinity. Each is a hypostasis, an actual subsisting reality, not a mere appearance or mode. The Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. and the Council of Constantinople in 381 both used hypostasis as a technical term to affirm the genuine, concrete reality of the divine persons. Not metaphors, not aspects, not modes, but actual subsisting realities.

When the author of Hebrews says that *pistis* is the hypostasis of things hoped for, the author is not saying that *pistis* is your confident feeling about things you hope for. The author is making an ontological claim, a claim about the structure of reality. *Pistis* is the underlying actual reality of the things you hope for, not your attitude toward them. The things themselves are already present, already real, at the level of being before they appear in your experience. The things you hope for are not absent, waiting somewhere in a future you cannot access. They are real now at the level of hypostasis, the level of actual being.

And *pistis* is the mode of contact by which you are in a relationship with that level. This is a staggering claim, and it is completely invisible in most English translations because "substance" in modern English means something like solid material, and "confidence" means something like

an optimistic feeling. Neither word carries the metaphysical weight of hypostasis! The author of Hebrews is telling you that pistis is not a psychological disposition toward an uncertain future. It is a form of contact with a reality that is already fully real, fully present, and the ground of everything that is happening to you. A reality that appears absent only because your ordinary modes of perception cannot access the level at which it exists.

The third cross-reference is in James 21:17, and it brings us to what has been called the most difficult tension in the New Testament. So also, faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. The Greek is οὕτως καὶ ἡ πίστις χωρὶς ἔργων νεκρά ἐστίν (hotōs kai ā pistis xōpis hergōn nekra estin), “so also faith without works is dead.” James says that pistis without works is dead. Also, Paul says in Galatians 2:16 that a person is justified by pistis, not by works.

For 16 centuries, these two passages were read as contradictory. When Martin Luther worked through the implications of his theology of sola fide (faith alone), he called the letter of James an epistle of straw because of this very passage, which he felt undermined his entire framework. But if pistis means divine persuasion, a living relational bond between the human being and the divine, something done to you by a force outside yourself, then James and Paul are not contradicting each other.

James says that a pistis that produces no visible reorientation of behavior is not a real pistis; it is something else. Perhaps it is intellectual assent to propositions, perhaps doctrinal loyalty, perhaps what contemporary English speakers call religious belief, the holding of correct opinions about invisible metaphysical realities. But the real thing, the persuasion that actually contacts the human interior and reorganizes it from within, always moves outward. It cannot be contained. It always produces motion. Not because you are trying to earn anything, not because you are performing your spirituality for an audience, human or divine, but because something genuinely alive moves. A seed that does not grow is not a living seed. A fire that does not give heat and light is not a fire that is burning.

James and Paul were examining the same phenomenon from two different angles. Paul was defending the source of pistis. It is not your works. It is Christ's prior faithfulness that you receive. James was defending the reality of pistis. If it is real, it will be visible. If it is invisible, it may not be real. The apparent contradiction arises only because the English word faith is broad enough to cover both genuine pistis and its pale imitation, without distinguishing between them.

The Greek word, at its root, is divine persuasion, which makes the distinction clear. Real persuasion changes behavior. That is what persuasion means. Now watch how everything comes together. Paul writes in Romans 1:17, one of the most consequential verses in the history of Western Christianity, the verse that ignited the Reformation when Martin Luther read it in his tower in Wittenberg around 1515: *Epistio a capito from pistis to pistis*. The phrase is usually translated as “from faith to faith,” and most readers pass it over quickly as a rhetorical flourish, a doubling for emphasis.

However, Paul is doing something precise here. The first pistis genitive case describes the pistis of God, the divine fidelity, the covenant faithfulness of God enacted in the history of Israel and [music] completed in Christ. The second pistis accusative case describes the pistis of the human being who receives that divine fidelity. The movement is from one to the other, from God's faithfulness as the source to the human being's pistis as the response, the resonance, the corresponding interior recognition, the justification of the human being, the being set right that Paul's entire letter to the Romans is about. That happens in the space between the divine pistis and the human pistis, in the meeting of the two.

Luther read this, and something broke open in him. He had been interpreting the phrase righteousness of God as the righteousness by which God judges, the impossible standard against which his sinful nature would always fall short. Terrified of a God who was righteous in the sense of demanding righteousness, he had been driving himself toward breakdown through his spiritual effort. Then he read ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν (ek pisteō's eis piston), “faith to faith,” and understood that the righteousness of God in Romans 1:17 is not the standard that condemns. It is the faithfulness that saves.

It is God's own pistis moving toward the human being, calling forth a corresponding pistis that sets the whole relationship right from the divine side before the human side does anything at all. Luther did not produce that understanding through harder trying. It arrived. It persuaded him. He was, in that moment, the recipient of what pistis describes and of the reform of Western Christianity that followed, including the splintering of the church, the printing press flooding Europe with vernacular scripture, the long and bloody religious wars, and the eventual shape of modernity itself. All of it traces back to one German monk in a tower, persuaded by the Greek word that his English translation had quietly misnamed.

The entire arc of the letter to the Romans, the entire argument Paul constructs across 16 chapters, one of the most architecturally elaborate theological arguments ever produced by a human mind, is not an argument for performing belief correctly. It is an announcement that a divine pistis, a cosmic fidelity, a pledge made in the eternal nature of God toward the human being, has been enacted in history. And that this enacted fidelity calls forth in the human being a corresponding pistis, a resonance, a persuasion, an interior recognition of something real.

The movement is from the divine to the human. The English word “faith” puts the movement in the opposite direction, from you toward God. As if you were the generator, as if the quality of your interior states were the engine of your reconciliation. But the Greek says something different. The Greek says you are the receiver. You are the one being persuaded. You are the one in whom something is continuously being born. The English never gave you access to this.

That is the thing Paul was writing about. That is the thing the author of Hebrews called the hypostasis of the things you hope for. The underlying reality, already present, already real, pressing upward into your awareness from beneath. You are not generating it. You are in contact with it. That contact was already there. Pistis does not grade itself. It is not in competition with its own past or future instances. It is simply what it is. Divine persuasion, contact made the

reality of the thing you hope for. Pressing into the reality of your awareness, the two touch at the level beneath performance, beneath effort, beneath the long, exhausting work of manufacturing a spiritual life that looks convincing to yourself and to others.

Carry the Greek word with you quietly, as you carry a word in a new language you have just learned, present on the underside of your awareness, coloring everything slightly differently than before. The point is to locate the layer of your experience where receiving is already happening, where something is already persuading you toward reality, and where the divine fides, the pledge made in the eternal nature of God before you were born, is already in contact with your interior. You cannot create that contact. You have never been able to create it. You can only stop obscuring it.

This is a remembering, a return, a way of repeatedly coming back to the original nerve of the word, the thing that existed in the Greek before the English arrived and, quietly and with the best of intentions, told you it was your job to believe hard enough. The pistis, the persuasion, does not need your help. It needs your openness. And openness is the one thing you can actually practice. Pistis is not something you find at the end of sufficient effort. It is the name for what has been finding you since before you had the language to receive it.