

## **Tough Topics: Can Infants Have Faith? What Does the Bible Say?**

*For you, O Lord, are my hope,*

*my trust, O LORD, from my youth.*

***Upon you I have leaned from before my birth;***

***you are he who took me from my mother's womb.***

*My praise is continually of you. (Psalm 71:5-6)*

Can a baby believe? Can an infant have faith? If not, why not? If so, how so? How this question is answered can be a dividing line between many Christians. Some claim faith is impossible for a child and will not baptize a person until they reach an “age of accountability”. Other traditions baptize as soon as possible, regardless of age. So, what’s the right approach? Let’s let the Scriptures decide...

### **Vocabulary**

But before we do that, we need a vocabulary lesson. I know, I know...but in the passages below there are many **different terms** used in the original Greek for “children” or “babies”, ones that represent **a wide spectrum of ages**.

BREPHOS (βρέφος)—an unborn child or a very small infant. A babe in arms.

PAIDION (παιδίον)—a child below the age of puberty. A general term.

MIKROS (μικρός)—a substantized adjective for “little ones”

NAPIOS (νήπιος)—an infant; not of legal age, a minor.

THALAZATON (θηλαζόντων)—a participle from the verb “one who nurses from the breast”.

TEKNON (τέκνον)—the most basic and often used word for a child of any age.

Whatever the age, we are talking about *humans before they are fully, cognitively developed and capable of answering for themselves*.

**Luke 18:15-17** *Now they were bringing even infants (BREPHOS) to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to him, saying, “Let the children (PAIDION) come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child (PAIDION) shall not enter it.”*

**Matthew 18:1-6** *At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And calling to him a child (PAIDION), he put him in the midst of them and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children (PAIDION), you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child (PAIDION) is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. “Whoever receives one such child (PAIDION) in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones (MIKROS) who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.*

**Matthew 21:15-16** *But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children (PAIDAS) crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of*

*David!” they were indignant, and they said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” And Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read,  
“ ‘Out of the mouth of infants (NAPIOS) and nursing babies (THAILAZATON) you have prepared praise’?”*

**Matthew 11:25-27** *At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children (NAPIOS); yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.*

**2 Timothy 3:14-15** *But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood (BREPPOS) you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*

**Luke 1:15, 41** *for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb; ...And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby (BREPPOS) leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit,*

**Acts 2:37-41** *Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children (TEKNON) and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”*

The above passages (mainly Jesus’ own words!) **give us a picture of a life in the kingdom of God as received by children (of all ages)**. Salvation belongs to children, as we are told again and again and again. While being a child can be a *metaphor for faith* (see below), most of the above passages are *literally* talking about children, even infants! So, whatever your definition of saving faith is, if it excludes babies from it, *you do not have a biblical definition of faith*.

### **The Definition of Faith**

Like many words, “faith” is multi-valent (see our *Tough Topics on Glory*). It can and does have *several shades of meaning*. It also is a noun that is *verbally-based*, that is, there is an underlying verb that entails many questions related to it, such “Faith in what, whom?”

To believe can mean to “have confidence in”. See John 2:24

To believe can mean to “consider possible”. See Romans 14:2

To believe can also mean to “come to know about...believe to be true”.

Consider this statement: *I believe in the devil*. What do I mean? I mean that I believe in his existence, i.e. I have faith that Satan is real. But is that our definition of faith with respect to salvation?

Our theological definition of faith must square with the biblical picture of salvation, and more precisely, *who does the work of saving*. For instance, if faith is generated in the heart of man and an act of the will and mind, then who is the author of faith? However, if faith is something that is *given*, something received apart from our work, then what might the definition be?

Might I suggest that faith, according to the Scriptures, which fits with the bible passages cited above, is TRUST. Faith is trusting in something, or SOMEONE, even when we don't see or even understand. **Saving faith is trusting something you don't necessarily comprehend. It is having dependance on God for one's salvation.** This "faith" can be articulated as we see in John 20:28 or Acts 16:34. People can and do make statements of faith.

But at a deeper fundamental level, **faith is a dependence that is not articulated but given by God.** *For by grace you are 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.* By grace, through faith. **Saving faith is that which clings to the promises of God.** It is not generated by the human but by the Spirit.

### **Faith as Dependence—The Metaphor of “Childlike” Faith**

Several passages express faith as something that is **a relational, utter dependance on God, like a child with his/her mother.**

**John 1:11-13** *He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*

**Ephesians 5:1** *Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.*

**1 John 3:1-2** *See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.*

To be a “child of God” is to be in a *relationship* with our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. It is to depend upon Him for everything, starting with our salvation. While as human creatures God has given us the reason and intellect to make rational choices, the overwhelming picture of saving faith in the Scriptures is of one *who relies upon and clings to God's Word and His Son.*

To be a child is also to be born into a relationship. Children don't choose their parents. Children don't declare a relationship.

**John 3:1-8** *Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*

### **Final Thoughts—If Children “Can't Have Faith”, What About Others?**

The basic argument *against* infant faith is that “a child does not have the cognitive ability to a) repent of their sins b) make a commitment to Jesus and c) live an active life of obedience. But what about people who are not children? What about the mentally handicapped or cognitively impaired? What about someone who has memory loss? What about someone who is in a coma? Is

salvation beyond their grasp? Or is it contingent upon a prior choice they made? Let me put it more crassly—*do you believe when you are asleep?*

If the “burden of faith” lies on cognitive ability, then there will be times of uncertainty. There will always be questions about one’s sincerity, or understanding, or life of repentance. *Satan preys on these things.* **But if salvation and faith is God’s working in us, to us, and through us, then there is always eternal comfort because His promises are certain and sure.** We need not doubt His work. While people can and do reject the free grace and mercy of God...while people do “lose their faith”...it is not on account of God’s action or choice. It is due to the sinful, stubborn heart of man. It is due to the willful, obdurate self who goes another way.

It's hard to comprehend a baby having faith. But the key is not that we comprehend it, but trust in what God’s Word clearly tells us. There is not a single passage in the Bible that speaks to a so-called “age of accountability”. We are called to place our reason underneath the Word of God, not above it. God invites all into His Kingdom, on the basis of faith. Including children!

### **Final, Final Thoughts—The Response of Faith**

What we do see throughout the Gospels are people who come to Jesus and plead for His mercy. We see example after example of dependance. Consider this well-known passage from Mark 9:

*And someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able.” And he answered them, “O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me.” And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. And Jesus asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” And Jesus said to him, “If you can’! **All things are possible for one who believes.**” Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “**I believe; help my unbelief!**”*

In this incredible story, the father pleads with Jesus to “do anything” to help his son. The man came to Jesus. He looked to the right place. But Jesus chides him for not fully trusting in Him. The man in response confesses that he both trusts in the Lord and needs more help to deepen that trust. This shows that faith is not mere cognitive assent. It is not “deciding” to believe. It is pure and simply dependance...and even a confession that he cannot believe on his own!

There are many such interactions between Jesus and people who “believe” in Him. Martha. The Samaritan woman at the well. Blind Bartimaeus. Zacchaeus. Nicodemus. They may initially seek Jesus out. But it is Jesus that gives them “sight”, i.e. *the ability to trust in Him*. Very often it takes Jesus to come to them *first*...or finally (see the story of the man born blind in John 9). It is Jesus Who does the work of “opening their eyes”. **But they do respond.** They make a confession of faith. However, *we must not confuse the confession as being the source of faith*. The response of faith is what comes from the gift of faith. As an infant or child grows, their faith becomes expressive. They begin to learn how to articulate it. They may even have moments where they want to dedicate their lives to Jesus. That is a wonderful thing. But it is the response to what was first given, and nurtured, and watered.