

LECTURE 3

FAITH: Mormonism | TEXT: Doctrine and Covenants (1835 Edition) | VOLUME: Lectures on Faith | AUTHOR: Joseph Smith

OVERVIEW

Lecture 3 of the 'Lectures on Faith' (originally part of the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants) functions as a systematic theology of the divine attributes necessary for human faith. The text argues that faith is not merely a passive belief but a principle of power that requires a specific intellectual and moral foundation. The author posits three pillars required for faith to be 'perfect and fruitful': 1) The belief in God's existence, 2) A correct understanding of His attributes (Mercy, Unchangeableness, Truth, Love, Impartiality), and 3) An 'actual knowledge' that the believer's current course of life is pleasing to God. The text extensively cites biblical passages to establish God's moral consistency, arguing that without these specific attributes (e.g., if God were changeable or a respecter of persons), humans could not rationally place confidence in Him. Theologically, this text shifts the locus of assurance from the finished work of Christ to the believer's conscious awareness of their own obedience, asserting that without the knowledge that one's life is according to God's will, saving faith cannot exist.

KEY FIGURES

God the Father, Jesus Christ, Moses, Peter

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. THE THREE PREREQUISITES OF FAITH

Assertion: Saving faith requires three things: 1. Belief in God's existence, 2. Correct idea of His character, 3. Actual knowledge that one's life is according to His will.

"Thirdly, An actual knowledge that the course of life which he is pursuing, is according to his will.— For without an acquaintance with these three important facts, the faith of every rational being must be imperfect and unproductive"

Evangelical Comparison: This doctrine represents a fundamental departure from the Evangelical understanding of Sola Fide (Faith Alone). In Evangelical theology, faith is the empty hand that receives Christ; it is a trust in His finished work precisely because the believer's own life is **not** according to God's will (Romans 4:5 - 'to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly'). Lecture 3 inverts this by making 'actual knowledge' of personal obedience a prerequisite for the existence of saving faith. This suggests that one cannot truly believe unto salvation until they first verify their own moral alignment with God, effectively placing sanctification (or the perception of it) before justification.

2. THE UNCHANGEABILITY OF GOD

Assertion: God is the same yesterday, today, and forever; His course is one eternal round.

"But it is equally as necessary that men should have the idea that he is a God who changes not... believing he is the same yesterday, to-day and forever, and that his course is one eternal round."

Evangelical Comparison: The text affirms the orthodox attribute of God's immutability (Malachi 3:6). However, the text introduces the phrase 'one eternal round' (from the Book of Commandments/Book of Mormon), which implies a cyclical nature to God's work or time, distinct from the linear historical progression typically understood in Judeo-Christian theology. While the attribute itself is shared, the text uses this attribute specifically to argue that God's requirements for faith and salvation never change between dispensations.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: While the list of divine attributes (Love, Truth, Mercy) appears orthodox, the theological framework is anthropocentric. In this text, God's attributes serve as a logical foundation for the human intellect to construct faith. The critical divergence lies in the 'Third requisite': that a man must know his life is according to God's will to exercise saving faith. This creates a 'works-righteousness' feedback loop. In Evangelical theology, a believer exercises faith **in order** to be justified and sanctified, often crying out 'I believe, help my unbelief' (Mark 9:24) while acknowledging sin. In this text, the believer must first establish

that their life is pleasing to God to have the confidence necessary for faith to be effective. This denies the Sola Fide principle that we are justified by faith apart from works of the law.

Shared Values:

God is personal and exists; God is love; God is truthful and cannot lie; God is no respecter of persons; God is immutable (unchanging)

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide (Faith Alone) – Faith is conditioned upon the 'actual knowledge' of personal obedience/works.
2. [Major] Sola Scriptura – The 'Book of Commandments' is cited as authoritative revelation alongside the Bible.

Semantic Warnings:

"Faith"

In Text: A principle of power dependent on intellectual assent to God's character and moral assurance of one's own obedience.

Evangelical: Trust and reliance on Christ's finished work, often exercised in weakness and dependence (Hebrews 11:1, Ephesians 2:8-9).

Example: *In this text: You cannot have faith if you doubt your obedience. In Bible: You have faith in Christ *because* you have no obedience of your own (Phil 3:9).*

"Salvation"

In Text: The result of a 'perfect and fruitful' faith which requires knowledge of one's alignment with God's will.

Evangelical: Deliverance from sin and death granted as a free gift to the ungodly who believe (Romans 4:5).

Example: *Text implies salvation is the end goal of a successful faith process; Bible presents salvation as a present possession of the believer (John 5:24).*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Life and salvation are the result of faith centering in God.

How Attained: Through exercising faith, which is only possible when one knows their life aligns with God's will.

Basis of Assurance: Subjective knowledge of personal obedience ('course of life').

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly contradicts Sola Fide by inserting a behavioral prerequisite (knowledge of obedience) before faith can be 'perfect' or saving.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Must believe God exists
2. Must obtain a correct idea of God's character, perfections, and attributes
3. Must pursue a course of life according to God's will
4. Must obtain 'actual knowledge' that one's life is pleasing to God

Implicit Obligations:

1. Constant self-examination to verify one's life aligns with God's will
2. Study of revelation to understand God's character
3. Rejection of any doubt regarding one's standing

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. The text says we need 'actual knowledge' that our course of life is according to God's will to have faith. How do you gain that knowledge with certainty?

2. If faith requires knowing you are pleasing God, what happens to your faith when you sin or struggle?
3. How does this teaching compare to Romans 4:5, where God justifies the 'ungodly' who have faith?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The need for an Unchangeable God – The text correctly identifies the human need for a stable anchor. The Gospel offers Christ as that anchor, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. [Hebrews 6:19 - 'We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.']
2. God is no respecter of persons – This reflects the universal offer of the Gospel. Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. [Romans 10:12-13 - 'For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile...']

Spiritual Weight:

1. Perfectionism/Uncertainty [Severe] – The believer is burdened with the impossible task of verifying their own life is fully 'according to God's will' *before* they can feel authorized to exercise saving faith. This creates a crisis where one cannot believe God will save them until they prove they are worth saving.
2. Conditional Assurance [Moderate] – Assurance is not based on the cross, but on the 'course of life.' Any personal failure immediately erodes the foundation of faith, leading to the 'doubt' the text warns against.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Revelation (External) and Assurance of Obedience (Internal)

Verification Method: The believer verifies truth by checking their own life against God's will; if they know they are obedient, their faith becomes 'perfect and fruitful.'

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology grounds assurance in the objective promises of God (1 John 5:13) and the internal witness of the Spirit regarding sonship (Romans 8:16), not in the self-assessment of one's 'course of life.'

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: 1835 (Published in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants)

Authorship: Traditionally Joseph Smith; critical scholarship often attributes the drafting of the Lectures on Faith to Sidney Rigdon, under Smith's supervision.

Textual Issues: The Lectures on Faith were decanonized by the LDS Church in 1921 on the grounds that they were 'theological lectures' rather than revelations, though they held scriptural status for nearly a century.