

# Trust or Believe

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A frightened man asked, "**What must I do to be saved?**" (Acts 16:30 NIV) He was answered, "**Be trusting in the Lord Jesus.**" (Acts 16:31 in a more accurate translation for today's vernacular) That question was paramount then and now. Should we not understand the question and answer after almost 2,000 years of pondering them? I ask, "Why do many, perhaps most, Christians and almost all non-Christians misunderstand the answer?" Many people might ask the question, but few understand the answer.

I will now provide the context of the question so that we have a common beginning point. A jailer in the ancient Macedonian city of Philippi had two Christians, among other prisoners, in his jail. The two were Paul and Silas, early Christian missionaries. An earthquake occurred during the night which compromised the jail, making it possible for prisoners to escape. Acts 16:27-31 describes a series of events immediately following the earthquake.

<sup>27</sup> The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped.

<sup>28</sup> But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" <sup>29</sup> The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup> He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, **what must I do to be saved?**" <sup>31</sup> They replied, "**Believe in the Lord Jesus,** and you will be saved--you and your household."  
(NIV)

The first thing to notice is that I did not use, in the first paragraph, a common translation of the answer, "Believe in the Lord Jesus." Instead, I translated with words in our current vernacular, with words that more accurately reflect the Greek language in which the original passage was written. I am not going to make a technical argument for this translation nor am I going to provide proof texts from the Bible to prove my point. I am going to provide some background information about the ancient Greek language and current English language. Then I will employ some common sense understanding about trust.

## Translation issues

To start with, we all should agree (and many know) that it is impossible to do word for word translations from one language to another, that is, it is impossible if the goal is to promote understanding. Let me use an easy illustration that is directly pertinent to the current issue.

In the ancient Greek language, people could have a belief, and they

could believe something. They could have a faith, and they could faith something (this last phrase sounds wrong because we do not have a verb "to faith" in English). The matrix, for ancient Greek, is:

<b>Noun</b>	<b>Verb</b>
belief	to believe
faith	to faith

But in English the matrix is:

<b>Noun</b>	<b>Verb</b>
belief	to believe
faith	

In English, people can have a belief, and they can believe something. They can have a faith, but they cannot faith something. As stated before, English does not have a verb form for faith.

Let me explain a bit more and further illustrate the problem of translation. In Greek, one word (noun and verb forms) was often used for "belief" and "to believe" and for "faith" and "to faith." So, in the New Testament often a belief is mentioned and the fact that people believe certain things. This situation presents no major problems, since Greek and English handle both the noun and verb forms of belief. (There is still a problem having to do with differences in the meaning of tenses that I will mention later and briefly.) The first major problem arising from the current topic occurs when the New Testament mentions faith and the fact that people "faith" certain things. Though "faith" as a verb is incorrect in English, it is more accurate. So, in many English translations people have "faith" and they "believe" certain things. Sometimes, for internal consistency, translations will translate the idea of "faith" to be "belief" and people "believe" certain things. Keep in mind, that in many New Testament passages, one Greek word (noun and verb forms) is being translated. Up to this point, verse 31 should begin with "**Faith in the Lord Jesus,**" which is incorrect English since "faith" is being used as a verb. So, "believe" is most commonly used in translations.

We have now come to a second, but related, problem. In earlier days of the Greek language, the one Greek word being used, meant "trust" and "to trust." Over time, the word also came to be used to mean "belief" and "to believe." Moving forward to English in the past few centuries, the situation at this level is a bit more complex. English has the word "faith" which is closer to "trust" than to "belief." To have faith in someone is to trust that person and not simply to believe that a person exists. To have faith in someone is to believe he exists and to trust him. To be faithful is to be loyal or trustworthy. The English idea of faith involves trust. But current English users are not careful in their uses of these words. So, if I had to choose the best single English word to use for translating the one Greek word (the one under

discussion), I would choose "trust" and "to trust." Let me note, that I would not do a translation that is so inflexible for a published translation. But for my current purposes, the usage is useful. So, verse 31 becomes, "**Trust in the Lord Jesus.**" And the matrix becomes:

<b>Noun</b>	<b>Verb</b>
belief	to believe
trust	to trust

If we settle on one single word for translation, the matrix becomes:

<b>Noun</b>	<b>Verb</b>
trust	to trust

Now for the third and final translation issue. The Greek present tense. In all languages it is possible to express punctiliar (at a point in time) and on-going action. In English the present tense normally expresses punctiliar action. For example, "I hit the ball." This present tense example expresses the idea that in the present, now, I hit the ball (at one point in time). The present progressive tense expresses on-going action in the present. For example, "I am hitting the ball." The Greek present tense used in Acts 16:31 is closer to the English present progressive than to the simple present tense. Though it is technically accurate to translate the Greek as, "Trust in the Lord Jesus," the translation, "**Be trusting the Lord Jesus,**" more accurately captures the meaning of the Greek phrasing.

## **Common sense**

Trust is the basis of all good or healthy relationships. For example, most people do not marry those whom they do not trust. Again, most people do not consider someone to be a friend if they do not trust that person. If we do not trust someone, then we almost always do not want to have a close and personal relationship with that person. Indeed, we tend to keep such untrustworthy people at arms length, if we have anything to do with them at all.

Let me push this assertion about trust to inanimate objects. When a person walks into a room into which she often goes, she sits in chairs that she trusts will hold her and be comfortable. If she does not trust a certain chair, she certainly would not simply plop down on it. Going a bit further. If she walks into a room at all, she trusts that the floor will hold her weight. My point here is that trust is a common and necessary feature of everyday life. We simply trusts certain things without continually questioning them.

Let me use the family unit to bring the idea a bit closer to trusting God, Jesus. A child grows up trusting his mother and/or his father. A baby does not fully understand his parents, and, as he begins to

understand his parents, his early beliefs about them are very inaccurate. A baby's and later a child's relationship is founded on trust in parents, not the accuracy of beliefs about parents. A child is likely full of inaccuracies in his beliefs about his parents, but his trust is likely well founded. Loving parents nurture and care for their children, regardless of the beliefs their children may have about them.

Let me ask a question which is related to the opening question asked by the frightened jailer. "Who among you thinks that you will be saved by the accuracy of your beliefs about the eternal God?" Which one of you completely and absolutely understands God and all of his actions and teachings? (Is it not impossible for temporal beings, such as, humans, to completely and absolutely comprehend an eternal God?) Which seems more consistent with a loving Father: to demand fully accurate beliefs or to respond to the simple trust of children? I will come back to this question later.

## James

Before I deal further with the previous question, I want to consider a passage in the New Testament, in the book of James. In the second chapter, the writer was dealing with the dual definition of the Greek word that we are considering, the word that was sometimes used for believing and sometimes for trusting. The particular verse I want to talk about is James 2:19 (NIV).

You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

Let me expand a part of that writer's thought. If you believe (just acknowledge) that there is only one God, that belief does not help you. Demons believe (know) there is one God, but they are not in relationship to him as Father. They do not trust him. When Paul and Silas told the frightened jailer to believe in Jesus, they were not talking about a simple belief in facts about God. They knew that plain belief about God would not help the jailer any more than plain belief helped demons. Paul and Silas were using the original definition of the word and telling the jailer to trust (to be trusting) in Jesus. The writer of James was warning Christians not to confuse "belief" with "trust." That warning is still pertinent today.

Let me ask again. "Who attains the Kingdom of God on the basis of the accuracy of all her beliefs about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the scriptures, and so forth?" Now let me ask, "Who attains the Kingdom on the basis of simply trusting Jesus, trusting our Father, whether or not particular beliefs are completely accurate?" We have an on-going relationship with our Father based on trust, the basis of all relationships. God simply loves us and wants to be in relationship with us. Do I have an adequate basis for saying this. I think so. **"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever trusts in him should not perish but have eternal life."**

On a personal and experiential level I have a basis also. I am learning

to simply trust Jesus, my Father and my ever present companion, the Holy Spirit. I am learning that my Father loves me and wants to be in relationship with me. I do not have to DO anything, I simply need to be trusting Him. Is my Father encouraging and leading me into being a healthy person? Yes! As a result, my relationship with Him is becoming better and my relationships with others are becoming better (I must now stop this line of thought since it is a different topic from the main topic of the current essay).

## Once saved

Let me deal with a related question that nags many Christians. Can a person lose her salvation? Is it true that once a person is saved, he cannot lose his salvation? The question is posed in several different ways and has even more answers. The question plagues people who speak English more than it does people in some other languages. English is noun oriented. In many of the passages in the New Testament where we see phrases like the "faithful", the actual Greek word (the one under discussion) being translated is a verb form that is more accurately translated the "trusting ones."

In English we think (largely because of our language) of salvation as a noun, something that we can have. If we can have this thing, then could we lose it? Greek is verb oriented. Salvation is a verbal construct, a process in which we are involved. If we understand salvation (notice the English noun form even here as I am trying to point out the differences) as a process, the answer becomes simple, and the problem, as posed by English speakers, dissipates. To be accurate we should say something like, "He who is trusting in Jesus is secure and he who is not trusting in Jesus is not secure." If you are not trusting in Jesus, what is the answer to your salvation? Be trusting in Jesus. If you are trusting in Jesus, what should you do? Keep trusting in Jesus. There is no benefit in thinking about an object, whether you have it or do not. The answer is always, "Be trusting in Jesus."