

Faith or Faithfulness: Romans 3:3?

For what if some did not believe? shall their unbelief
make the faith of God without effect?

There is a disagreement among translators and commentators about whether the word "faith" should actually be "faithfulness, making the translation "shall their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect?" It sounds good that someone's unbelief cannot do away with God's faithfulness. After all we don't want anything to interfere with His faithfulness toward us, do we?

But is it the right way to translate the Greek word?

Regarding the question about Romans 3:3, it is our opinion that the best translation is "faith." The Greek word "pistin" (accusative form of pistis) is used in both the Received Text and the Critical text. The translation "faithfulness" is typical in the critical text translations. It is not a translation problem. It is an interpretation problem. Below are some reasons why we believe the correct translation is "faith."

The Meaning of "pistis"

This definition is taken from *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, which is published by AMG International and written by Spiros Zodhiates, who himself is a Greek:

"Faith. Subjectively meaning firm persuasion, conviction, belief in the truth, veracity, reality or faithfulness (**though rare**). Objectively meaning that which is believed, doctrine, the received articles of faith." –Author's emphasis.

Notice that *pistis* can be translated "faithfulness," but that is rare. In other words, the word hardly ever means faithfulness.

Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words says, " 'pistis ... , primarily, 'firm persuasion,' a conviction based upon hearing (akin to peitho, "to persuade"), is used in the NT always of 'faith in God or Christ, or things spiritual.' "

The Greater Context

The word *pistis* is used in the New Testament 244 times. In all but two places the King James version translates the word "faith," "belief," "believes," or "believe." In Acts 17:31, it is translated "assurance" in a context where God is encouraging or persuading people to believe. In Titus 2:10, it is translated "fidelity" (which means faithfulness). The context in Titus is about a servant who doesn't steal but shows good fidelity. The word *pistis* is used, because it means this person is one who can be believed in, he can be trusted.

Therefore, the greater use of the word *pistis* is faith and that is weighty evidence that Romans 3:3 most likely also means faith.

There is a different word that means “faithful” - pistos (See Ephesians 1:1 for example)

This word, *pistos*, is defined in the Word Study dictionary as, “True, sure, trustworthy, believable, worthy of credit ... Faithful in duty to oneself and to others, of true fidelity.” The word is used 66 times and is translated *faithful* or *faithfully* almost every time.

The NT Use of the Phrase “the faith”

This phrase is always used in the NT to mean one of two things:

- 1) A belief that someone holds in their heart, or
- 2) Something someone believes in; the object of faith, usually the Gospel.

When the phrase is pointing to *something believed in*, it always points to God, Christ, or the Word of God, particularly the Gospel. Examples of this are: Acts 6:7; 13:8; 16:5 and many others. “The faith” also refers to *the faith in a person’s heart*. “The faith of Abraham” means faith Abraham had in his heart in what God promised him (Rom. 4:16). In Acts 24:24, “the faith” is in Christ.

There is a use of this phrase that is almost exactly like Romans 3:3 in Galatians 2:16; “that we might be justified by the faith of Christ.” The “faith of Christ” is not *faith that Christ has*. Nor is it the *faithfulness of Christ*. Rather, it involves the faith we have in Christ. We know this because it has to do with how we are justified. “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ... Therefore we conclude that a man is **justified by faith** without the deeds of the law” (Romans 3:24, 28). Therefore, justification requires that a sinner have faith in the Gospel of Christ. So, the meaning of the phrase “the faith of Christ” is this (based on the usage of the phrase “the faith” in other verses):

- 1) “The faith” is the Gospel. So, “the faith” that belongs to Christ, that is, the Gospel, justifies us when we believe it (having faith in the gospel is the same as having faith in Christ).
- 2) We have faith in the gospel and this gives us justification.

Therefore, the phrase “the faith of Christ” means the *faith about Christ*; that is, the gospel. We are not justified by the works of the law, but by the gospel of Christ. In particular, when we have faith in the gospel of Christ, we are justified.

Romans 3:3 in Its Immediate Context

Romans 2:28-3:4, is one connected train of thought.

Romans 2:28-29 – The point of these verses is that a true Jew is not one who is Jew only physically. He must be a Jew inwardly by faith in Jesus Christ.

Romans 3:1 – So, the logical question is asked. What is the advantage of being a physical Jew?

Romans 3:2 – Paul points out only one advantage. The oracles of God, the Scriptures, were given to and through them.

Romans 3:3 – Back to the key issue of chapter two, Paul points them to the issue of belief or unbelief. That is the difference between a merely physical Jew and a true Jew.

“For what if some did not believe?” Believe what? The oracles of God (v.2). Some of the Jews did not believe the Word of God, especially those parts about salvation in Christ.

“Shall it make the faith of God of no effect?” Here (just as in other places “the faith” refers to the Gospel) “the faith,” which belongs to God, refers to the “Oracles of God.” God has given the Jews the *Oracles of God* and *that* is “the faith” to them and to God. Yet, some of the Jews do not believe those Oracles. Does their unbelief make the Oracles of no effect? Of course not. Does their unbelief make the Oracles ineffective in the lives of those who do believe? Of course not.

Romans 3:4 - God forbid: yea, let God be true, but every man a liar. Whether you believe or not, God’s Oracles are true. Those who speak against His Word are liars.

“The faith” is the truth in God’s Word, which we believe. You see, Paul was not concerned about God’s faithfulness in these verses. He was concerned about God’s truth and whether we believe it or not. He was concerned about faith.