

# Does Faith Fail?: A Study of Luke 22:32

Fr. George Odafe,

## 1.0 Introduction

The concept, new evangelization, has rightly become a concept of common usage in theological discourses that centre on the maturation of the Christian faith among peoples, because among many reasons for this development, our age seems to be passing through a difficult phase in the expression, teaching and practice of the faith. One might say in some parts of the world, people have become faith “shy.” In the desire to make the faith much more felt in our time and in tune with the spirit of new evangelization, new ways of maturing the faith have been evolved, adopted and adapted into local Churches and some of those ways leave much to be desired. Chief among those ways in Nigeria, for instance, is found in the influx of uncensored Pentecostal ideas and practices that are based on the personal interpretation of biblical passages, which are at times wrong, arising from an arm chair practice of biblical interpretation. On this matter, both the Nigerian clergy and faithful have some share in the blame, if it is a blame at all. The danger of which 2 Peter 1:20-21 is cautiously neglected. It says, “know this first of all, that there is no prophecy of scripture that is a matter of personal interpretation, for no prophecy ever came through human will; but rather human beings moved by the holy Spirit spoke under the influence of God.” Painfully, some of the trends of the new era of evangelization on the part of the word, consciously or unconsciously, do not take seriously to heart the words of 2 Peter 1:20-21. This is because in the contemporary world, all and sundry have become “professionals” in the interpretation of biblical matters. What this has engendered are some unbelievable teachings.

When I read Peter Ebidero’s write up on faith, where he said, “Faith Can Fail,”<sup>1</sup> I was gobsmacked. Faith, in its strictest biblical sense, is dependent on and rooted in the divine, who does not undergo accidental changes. For faith to fail means God can fail. And because it is expected not to fail, it grounds our relationship with God. No wonder G. Barth says that faith is “the central and comprehensive designation for one’s relationship to God, and especially that faith now entered into an indissoluble relationship to Jesus as the crucified and exalted Lord of the Church.”<sup>2</sup> The big question is, does faith fail? Were there inclinations to faith possibly failing in Jesus’ teachings and actions? Peter Ebidero quoted Luke 22:31-34 as his scriptural basis with emphasis on Luke 22:32.<sup>3</sup> Did Luke 22:32 really mean that faith as an entity fails?

This paper shall be based on a study of the Greek word, *pistis*, because the New Testament Greek Text of Luke 22:32 used the word, *pistis*. And the works of G. Barth<sup>4</sup> and Walter Bauer<sup>5</sup> shall basically guide our study. The paper shall thereafter use contextual and grammatical analysis to understand what Jesus really meant about Peter’s faith in Luke 22:32. This shall then be followed by a synthesis and conclusion. Let it be held from the outset that this paper is not

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Ebidero, “10 Things Children Should Learn About Faith,” in *The Voice Magazine* (Vol 6; Douglas Martins, ed.; Kano: St. Louis Secondary School, 2013), 15.

<sup>2</sup> G. Barth, “Pistis,” in *EDNT Vol 3*, (1994) 93.

<sup>3</sup> Ebidero, “About Faith,” 15.

<sup>4</sup> G. Barth, “Pistis,” 93-96.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, Revised and Edited by Frederick William Danker, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 818 and 820.

interested in theological and pastoral discourses, but only in showing from Jesus' use of *pistis*, that faith as an entity does not fail.

## **2.0 *Pistis*: Meaning and Usage by Jesus in the Gospels Outside of Luke 22:32**

### **2.1 Meaning**

The noun *pistis* (faith, belief) and the verb *pisteuo* (I believe, have faith) occur 243 times in the New Testament,<sup>6</sup> indicating how widely and deeply used the concept is in the New Testament. *Pistis* in its nominative feminine singular occurs 36 times in the New Testament, with only 10 occurrences in the synoptic Gospels, but none at all in the Gospel of John. Considering these fewer occurrences of *pistis* in the Gospels a lot of questions come to mind, because the concept of faith pervades and dominates the New Testament and in fact shapes Christianity in totality and entirety. One might rightly hold that, as a concept, it concerns a power greater than imagined, and so, statistics bear no relevance in determining its value.

*Pistis* as a Greek word has multiple shades of meaning, but a common nuance is noticeable in the different meanings, as we shall soon notice. Walter Bauer says *pistis* is that "which evokes trust...the state of being someone in whom confidence can be placed, a sense of reliability."<sup>7</sup> Rudolf Bultmann says that *pistis* is "confidence," "trust" with a reference...to the person, relations and also things trusted: In this case, a trust with reference to Christ (God). Furthermore, he said, *pistis* means the "guarantee," which creates the possibility of trust, that which may be relied on, or the possibility of assurance.<sup>8</sup> That is the kind of guarantee that Jesus provides in his words and actions as presented in the Gospels. G. Barth adds that "it is trust which one puts into practice...",<sup>9</sup> like in those who come to Jesus putting their ability to trust Jesus into practice. *Pistis* is also a state of believing the reliability of the one trusted, to help in physical and spiritual distress;<sup>10</sup> a feature apparently glaring, even to the blind, in Jesus' ministry in the Gospels. The common nuances running through all these definitions of *pistis* are trust and confidence in the reliability of persons or beings, relations and also things in whom the trust and confidence are placed. Hence, trust and confidence in the reliability of Christ. We shall now look at how Jesus' use of *pistis* in the Gospels confirms these nuances of *pistis*.

### **2.2 Jesus' Usage of *Pistis* in the Gospels**

*Pistis*, as a state of confident trust in the reliability of the one trusted, finds expression in Matthew 2 times (Matt 9:22 and 15:28), 2 times in Mark (Mark 5:34 and Mark 10:52) and 5 times in Luke (Luke 7:50; 8:25, 48; 17:19; 18:42; 22:32). Matt 9:22 shows its fullest expression in verse 21, where the woman suffering Haemorrhage said, "if only I can touch his cloak, I shall be cured;" the cure, which made Jesus to tell her, "your faith (*he pistis sou*) has saved you..." The woman's statement in verse 21 completely showed reliability in the ability of Jesus to cure her, which Jesus interpreted as an expression of her faith in him.

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<sup>6</sup> Emmanuel Maigari, "The Johannine Concepts of 'Faith' and 'Witness': Imperative for Authentic Christian Witnessing in Nigeria," in *JORAS Vol 3*, (2013) 102.

<sup>7</sup> Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 818.

<sup>8</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, "Pisteuō," in *TDNT Vol VI*, (1968), 176.

<sup>9</sup> G. Barth, "Pistis," 93.

<sup>10</sup> Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 818.

The same reliability is also noticed in Matt 15:28, where the Syrophoenician woman's response in verse 27 showed one of the most remarkable expression of faith in the New Testament, because in the case of this woman, in verse 26 Jesus "humiliated" her and "insulted" the human dignity of her daughter by saying, "it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs (*tois kynariois*)."

The use of *kynariois* (dogs) by Jesus, says Otto Michel, shows that Jesus has in mind little dogs, which could be tolerated in the house, but he said the "answer of the Gentile woman (yet she said, "please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters") "...simply appeals to the readiness of Jesus to help, which knows no frontiers. So the faith of the Gentile woman sets itself on firm grounds unconditionally under the Messianic lordship of Christ, and in this unconditional quality it receives the acknowledgment and promise of Jesus."<sup>11</sup> The acknowledgement and promise of Jesus are in a simple sentence; "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." This sentence expresses the deep-seated trust of the woman in the ability of Jesus to make a difference in her daughter's situation.

The case of Mark 5:34 and Matt 9:22 are the same, but Mark 10:52, whose context begins from verse 42, presents the case of Bartimaeus, whose confident trust in Jesus' ability to give him his sight was not quietened even by the rebuke of the crowd for him to be quiet as he shouted for help. When Jesus asked him in verse 51, "what do you want me to do for you?" His response was straight to the point. He said, "Master, I want to see," and Jesus said, "your faith (*he pistis sou*) has saved you." The same perception of *pistis* is expressed in Luke 7:50. The context of Luke 7:50 begins from verse 36, where it introduces the narrative of a sinful woman, who wiped Jesus' feet with her hair after bathing them with her tears, then kissed and anointed them with the ointment she brought. What she did to Jesus gained for her forgiveness of her many sins; indicating that the woman just wanted transformation through forgiveness, for in verse 39, the narrator had prepared the mind of the reader with an insight that the woman sought for forgiveness, when the Pharisee remarked that Jesus was not supposed to have any business with the woman because she was a sinner. In conclusion, Jesus said to her, "your faith (*he pistis sou*) has saved you..." She confidently trusted that if she got through to Jesus, she would get her much needed forgiveness and life's transformation. The case of Luke 8:25 is not about forgiveness, but about Jesus' ability to deal with every situation, even with the most life threatening of situations. The context of Luke 8:25 begins from verse 22, which talks about the calming of the storm and Jesus' amazement at the inability of the Apostles to trust in his ability to calm the situation should they make recourse to him. His amazement prompted the question, "where is your faith" (*pou he pistis humon*)? The case of Luke 8:25 draws out more powerfully the inability of faith to fail, rather it is the quality of response to Jesus that can fail. There should be no conditionality in our faith response to Jesus, for the Twelve in the boat delayed in going to Jesus, because of their faith or lack of faith. "Little" or "no faith" presupposes conditionality in their response to Jesus. Any conditionality, negatively shaping the quality of response to Jesus' reliability, can make faith not to materialize in its intended effect or expectation.

Luke 8:48 shares the same context with Matt 9:22, while the context of Luke 17:19 begins in verse 11, and it talks about the curing of the Ten Lepers in which only the Samaritan returned to

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<sup>11</sup> Otto Michel, "kynapriois," in *TDOT* Vol III (1965) 1104.

give thanks. Jesus' response was "your faith (*he pi, stis sou*) has saved you." In this case, his faith gave him not just physical healing, but as well inner cure. Finally, Luke 18:42 shares the same context and content with Mark 10:52.

Our study of those *pistis* passages draw out encouraging implications. All the persons involved in the narratives believed that Jesus was capable of changing their situation, all that was left for them was to go up to Jesus in faith and entrust themselves into his reliability. Their encounters with Jesus led them to make some of the most remarkable expressions of confidence in Jesus' reliability in the New Testament. It means half of the work for solving their problems had been in Jesus before their appearing before his presence, and Jesus' use of the third person perfect active indicative of *so-dzo-* (swzw), *seso-ken* (se,swke,n), in 7 of the 9 occurrences of the *pistis* passages just studied, draws this out. We know that the perfect tense describes an event that, completed in the past has results existing in the present time or it indicates not the past action as such but the present "state of affairs" resulting from the past action.<sup>12</sup> By implication, it means that the healing, regaining of sight and calming of the storm had already been done in Jesus, before the confidence expressed by persons in Jesus made it to be felt in the present. Thus reinforcing that *pistis* is simply dependability on the reliability of Jesus. Though Jesus speaks of faith in a series of miracle stories (Mark 2:5//Matt 9:2//Luke 5:20; Mark 5:26//Luke 8:50; Matt 8:10//Luke 7:9; Matt 9:29; 15:28)...the synoptic tradition exhibits that "supplicating faith precedes miraculous healing and receives the miracle itself. For this reason the demand for signs (Matt 12:38ff. par.; Mark 8:11ff. par.) and demonstration miracles (Matt 4:5ff. par.; Mark 15:32 par.) is strictly rejected, and Jesus performs no miracles where he comes up against unbelief (Matt 13:58 par.)."<sup>13</sup> Miracles there should depend on God. That being the case, can faith fail? If the answer is yes, then Jesus cannot be reliable. If the answer is no, then we acknowledge that the value of faith is not on the person who believes but in Jesus who never fails; he is not limited by any means. This dependability of faith in Christ, and by extension, God, is responsible for the use of all kinds prepositions and the dative cases alongside faith in most other instances, in which faith and its other nuances and grammatical forms are mentioned in the other parts of the New Testament, so as to show that Christ is the object of faith and Christ does not fail. Most striking is Heb 11:1-2, which seems to present the definition of faith, understood by G. Barth, as making an assertion about the object of faith. Heb 11:1-2 thus assures that the blessings of the promise were a dependable reality to which believers hold fast, a trust in God's promise. That means that faith can only die from the moment we stop putting our trust in the reliability of God, but as long as we have that trust, it does not fail because God cannot fail. So what does Jesus really mean in Luke 22:32 about Peter's faith not failing?

### 3.0 Understanding Luke 22:32

If Jesus' use of *pistis* in the gospels, before Luke 22:32, shows that faith does not fail, what did Jesus mean in Luke 22:32 about praying that Peter's faith may not fail? Luke 22:32 says:

*evgo . de. evdee ,the n peri . sou/ hi,na me evkli,pe he pi, stis sou. kai. su, pote evpistre,psas ste,,rison tou.s avdelphou,s sou*, which roughly translates as *but I prayed*

<sup>12</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Michigan, Zondervan, 1996) 573. The second definition was taken by Daniel B. Wallace from Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek* (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2001) 96.

<sup>13</sup> G. Barth, "pistis," 94

concerning you in order that your faith may not fail, but once you return, strength your brothers! The African Bible translates it as “but I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have returned back, you must strengthen your brothers.” The use of the pronoun “own” in “your own faith” is meant to emphasise the individual character of Peter’s faith; the bone of contention here being *me ē evkli,pe ē he ē pi,stis sou* (your faith may not fail). Can faith as an entity fail therefore? Is it what Jesus really meant in this passage? We shall attempt to understand Jesus’ mind in the following processes below. We shall begin with the literary and historical context of this verse.

### 3.1 Literary and historical context.

Although R. Alan Culpepper<sup>14</sup> and Raymond Brown<sup>15</sup> slightly differ in their extent of the literary context of Luke 22:32, they both still agree in part, that it falls under the Passion Narratives section of Luke. This section presents the narratives of the events that built up to Jesus’ actual passion and death on the cross. Raymond E. Brown breaks this context into three subdivisions: 22:1-38: *conspiracy against Jesus, Last Supper*; 22:39-23:25: *Prayer and arrest on the Mount of Olives, Jewish and Roman trial*; and 23:26-56: *Appearance in Jerusalem and ascension to heaven*. This places our text in the conspiracy against Jesus subdivision (22:1-38).<sup>16</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, on the other hand, titled the section within which our focus text falls as, “Jesus’ Prediction of Peter’s Denial (22:31-34).”<sup>17</sup> This section (22:31-34) talks about the Jesus’ prediction of Peter’s denial, but it would also lead to a greater empowerment of his leadership ability (cf. Acts 1-15). Peter, despite the feeling that Jesus’ statement in 22:32a is a test of the level of his commitment, promised to be ready to die for Jesus. Unfortunately, he did not know that he would deny Jesus three times and regret it (Luke 22:54-62). So Jesus prayed against Peter’s possible loss of faith in the midst of what lies ahead. The eventual denial did not mean faith failed, because Peter did not show faith in Jesus that failed. He just simply lost it. His confident trust in Jesus’ reliability to make good out of the present situation was not in him, and he did not even show it like the persons in the other *he ē pi,stis sou* passages we studied earlier. The look of Jesus at Peter in Luke 22:61 enabled him to immediately regain the faith he lost, not its failure, because he did not demonstrate it, as to such that it failed.

### 3.2 Grammatical Analysis and Synthesis

The syntax of this text is quite simple. One worries first of all about the verb *evdee ē, the ē n* that is an aorist passive first person singular of *deo,mai*, which ordinarily means *to beseech*. The worry is because the verb is in passive voice. This implies Jesus was not supposed to be the performer of the action of beseeching. Secondly, *deo,mai* is different from the word, *proseuchomai*, which technically means *to pray*. *Deo,mai* in the New Testament has the sense of “to ask” or “to seek” as the context may determine. In some other instance it may have the sense of “please” as when Paul asks the chiliarch for permission to address the people (Acts 21:39). Over time in its usage in the New Testament, it also came to have the sense of *proseuchomai* (prayer). Hence came to

<sup>14</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, “Luke,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (eds. Leander E. Keck *et al.*; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 36.

<sup>15</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997) 226.

<sup>16</sup> Brown, *New Testament*, 226

<sup>17</sup> Culpepper, “Luke,” 37.

be used for requests to God and therefore for “to pray,” “prayer.” Therefore it is used for specific prayer in concrete situations, like in our text, where Jesus prays that Peter’s faith may be strengthened, and in Heb 5:7 in reference to Jesus’ prayer.<sup>18</sup>

*evdee* „the *n*, which is the verbal form of our text, appears 2 times in the Luke. In 9:40, it carried the sense of begging or beseech, and in our text, the sense of praying; semantically sharing the same meaning. That Jesus used *evdee* „the *n* in our text to pray so that Peter’s faith may be strengthen and not just to fail. This prayer of Jesus for Peter with the verb *evdee* „the *n*, is given some grounding in *evkli,pe*, an aorist subjunctive third person singular of *evklei,po*, a mood which states the purpose of Jesus’ prayer (*evdee* „the *n*). *evklei,po* technically means *to be no longer in existence, fail, give out, be gone of money or to cease as state or event, fail, die out*. If *evklei,po*, has this wide range of meanings one wonders why translations have not adopted: “praying so that Peter’s faith may not cease to exist,” a meaning that can conveniently fit into this passage. It is therefore not surprising that Walter Bauer interprets, *evklei,po*, of Luke 22:32 (*evdee* „the *n*) as concerning: to cease as state or event, fail or to die out. Thus since our study of the *pistis* passages in the Gospels showed confident trust in Jesus’s reliability does not fail, Jesus was not at this point implying that Peter’s faith would fail, but was praying that it might not die out or cease as state.

Furthermore, many other translations of our text like that of the African Bible, translate the “*sou*” in *he* *pi,stis sou*, with the addition of the pronoun “own” to the “your” as a way of emphasising the individual character of Peter’s faith and not faith as an entity. “*sou*” is personal pronoun in the genitive case. It is difficult to pin it down to a particular genitive. If it is taken as a possessive genitive, then it refers to Peter’s own faith as the African Bible would interpret. If attributive genitive, then it refers to the quality of faith Peter had for which Jesus prayed should be strengthened and not cease to exist in the face of the impending difficult moment that stands before him.<sup>19</sup> Either form of genitives is useful in the interpretation of the personal pronoun under contention, since two senses may be involved in this pronoun, with bot referring to Peter’s quality of faith, which needs to remain alive. Therefore, Peter’s faith was not going to fail, but tested in order that it might not die. The worse that could have happened was that Peter would lose his faith, which is totally different from it failing, because faith that depends on the reliability of God should not fail. Little wonder, Heinrich Greeven says that Jesus prayed for Peter’s faith to be strengthened.<sup>20</sup>

### 3.3 Synthesis

A number of scholars have attempted to understand what Luke 22:32 really meant in the words of Jesus on the issue of Peter’s faith not failing. Much ink has been poured on paper on this issue and night lights have been lit to find a reasonable solution to this difficult passage of the New Testament within the Passion Narratives of the Gospels. R. Alan Culpepper holds that Peter’s faith did not fail because “the outcome is a result of both the strength of Peter’s faith and the effectiveness of Jesus’ prayer,”<sup>21</sup> since Peter still depended on the reliability of Jesus, made

<sup>18</sup> Heinrich Greeven, “*deomai*,” in *TDNT* Vol II (2006) 40-41.

<sup>19</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 81-82, 86-88.

<sup>20</sup> Greeven, “*deomai*,” 40-41

<sup>21</sup> Culpepper, “*Luke*,” 428

effective in Jesus' prayer. Filip Joel holds that Jesus' prayer softens Peter's denial, for Peter showed his willingness to follow Jesus to death, albeit, Jesus predicts Peter's denial of him, he, however, did not renounce the fundamental value of his person.<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, faith cannot fail, for it depends on Christ and the power of God (cf. 1 Cor 2:5). The power of God cannot fail, like we saw in those *pistis* passages we studied. And if faith depends on the power of God, then it is reliable enough not to fail. Rather, it is the individual who may refuse to trust in God's power and reliability; that implies that the person has no faith or the person lost it.

#### 4.0 Conclusion

Unfortunate notions in Christianity concerning issues like the failure of faith (that are usually backed up by poor biblical exegesis) have been responsible for the high and annoyingly continued lingering of syncretism and superstition among Nigerian Christians, and especially, Catholics. Pentecostalism in Nigeria, rather than help faith to tackle the problems arising from syncretism and superstition, has, disappointingly championed it. Prayers are often against the principalities and powers of the devil, rather than centering them on the reliability of the power of God; the consequences of which God's power is not often mentioned in prayers. Within the Catholic Church in Nigeria it has given birth to the rising number of *ebube* priests, who sometimes sell their own holy water or blessed anointing oils bearing their names and photographs on the sticker on the bottles containing such holy water and blessed oils. This area needs serious re-evangelization in Nigeria or one might say a serious programme of post-Seminary formation for such priests. While Europe is decrying the fall in those who subscribe to the Christian faith and ideals, we should be decrying the increasing number of those who have no confident trust in the reliability of God and Christ to deal with every situation in faith.

Otherwise I cannot understand why the Sacrament of Reconciliation, for instance, is becoming irrelevant to some Catholics within some Nigerian cultures, especially as regards to certain sins, like adultery. The Bible and the Christian faith abhor adultery (cf. Exod 20:14; Lev 18:20; 20:10; Deut 22:22; Matt 5:27-28). In fact, Deut 22:22 and others even recommend that both the man and woman shall be put to death. So adultery is a grave sin, but it is forgivable. However, because of syncretistic tendencies, women who have committed adultery, in certain Nigeria cultures, still don't feel confidently trustful that the confession they made at the Confessional would wipe away their sins and the consequent social effect. Most of such unfortunate women still feel their sin of adultery may kill their husbands or children or maybe they themselves, even after having gone for Confessions and changed their ways of life for the better. Thus they either subject themselves or are subjected to the rigorous and embarrassing traditional processes of cleansing, long after they had done sacramental confession. Did their faith in the power of God's

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<sup>22</sup> Filip Noel, "Luke," in *The International Bible Commentary* (eds. William R. Farmer *et al.*; Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1998) 1503.

forgiveness fail them that they reverted to the traditional method? Or was it that they had no faith at all in the reliability of God's power of forgiveness?

It is not only in the area of sin, but also in life's troubles. The number of Catholics making recourse to their traditional witch doctors for solutions to their problems is gradually making geometric increases. I am told Catholics now use the Okija shrine to settle disputes, in which the offending partner quickly moves for settlement because of the mere mention of Okija priest. Yet these same Catholics would confidently stand before their Catholic priests and brag about their unreadiness for settlement.

There is the need, therefore, for people to understand that faith never fails. Our study of *pistis* has shown that faith does not fail, nor did Jesus mean so in Luke 22:32. Our evangelizing work today should focus on how to make Christians more confident in the reliability of Christ's power.