

# **A Faith in Three Dimensions**

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**Text: Hebrews 11:4-7**

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## **OPENING PRAYER:**

Gracious God and Father, You are of an infinite majesty. And only when we see your son face to face, crowned with honor, and glory, will it dawn upon our then sinless souls just how worthy you are to be worshipped and praised. We thank you that in your goodness, week by week, in this room, you come in your grace and power, in a sense of your glory and goodness, to give us a foretaste of that world to which we are traveling. To provide us with assurances that it is possible to taste heaven below even as we march to the heavenly Zion. We thank you that the men of grace have found glory begun below. And that the upward climb to glory is spread with the fruits and delicacies, of fellowship with your people, of the strengthening of your word, the privilege of prayer, the joy of song. We pray as we turn again to place our lives under the teaching of your sacred truth, that our minds may be illumined by the power of your Holy Spirit. That our affections may burn within us because we are conscious of the presence of Jesus Christ. And our wills may yield to you. That our lives may become lives of service and joyful obedience to you. And that we may discover more and more, that the yoke of Jesus Christ fits easily and well upon our shoulders. And that it is our joy, as well as our privilege, to be yoked to him as we seek to live in the power of his Spirit for your glory. So come and bring us further on we pray. Bring us further into your presence. And take us we ask and transform us by your word into what you desire us to be. And this we pray in Jesus our Saviors name. Amen.

Please be seated.

## **SCRIPTURE READING (Hebrews 11:4-7)**

Now, this morning, we continue to study and read through the great letter to the Hebrews. And we've come this morning to Hebrews chapter 11, verses four through seven. And you'll find the passage in the pew Bible, page 1007. And if you don't have a Bible of your own with you, you will find one in the pew rack in front of you, for our children who have brought their children's Bible it is on page 1498, page 1007. And page 1498.

Author of Hebrews is coming near to the end of, what he calls in chapter 13 verse 22, his word of exhortation or encouragement or stimulus. And even perhaps warning. As he is writing to Christians he believes may have made a strong profession of faith in the past, but are in danger of wavering and drifting and turning back. And he has now shown them how great Jesus Christ is. Why would they dream of leaving him. And he's coming in these verses in chapter 11, with a whole series of illustrations of those who did not waver. Who did not drift. Who did not go back, but who persevered in faith. So let us hear God's word, Hebrews 11, verses four through seven.

*By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him. By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, and reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.*

## **SERMON:**

Sometimes, when you mention a particular book of the Bible, to a fellow Christian they will immediately tell you what their favorite chapter is in that book. And unless I am mistaken, and my experience has been idiosyncratic, most Christians particularly like Hebrews chapter 11. Something about these heroes of the faith many of whom they have known since their childhood days almost as though they lived in the same street as they did.

But sometimes it's true with chapters of the Bible that we love and with which we are particularly familiar, that we never stop to ask what is actually a very important question. Why is Hebrews 11 here? What is the purpose in the context of this letter of the author having written Hebrews chapter 11. And it's fairly clear, I think, that he is following a style of preaching. Most preachers stay within one style of preaching: three points, and a poem as they used to say in Scotland. And we find naturally, those of us who speak in public in any context that we have our way of doing things, and usually it fits into a particular style. And I imagine whoever the author of the letter to the Hebrews was that he too had a particular style. And it looks as though he wasn't alone in this. It looks as though his style was to engage in exposition of truth and exhortation to believers. And then to give illustrations.

His illustrations are not drawn from what happened when he was having breakfast with his wife. His illustrations are characteristically drawn from the Old Testament Scriptures. And he's really saying to these believers, some of them, perhaps many of whom, were struggling against the odds in their Christian life, think now as we come to an end of this word of exhortation, think of this family to which you belong. Think of these great heroes of the faith. Think of the way they face challenges and difficulties that you haven't even begun to face, and see how God sustained them in their testimony through faith.

And almost at random you would think he begins this series of illustrations in our passage this morning, verses four through seven, with illustrations chosen as it happens from Genesis chapter four, Genesis

chapter five, and Genesis chapter six. There's an interesting variation in the context of these illustrations.

The first illustration is taken from a family where there were two sons very different from one another. And the focus of attention is on the difference between one brother and another brother.

The second illustration, the illustration from Genesis chapter five, is the illustration of one man who sticks out in his whole family tree, a man who was made different by faith, not only from his brother, but from his entire family tree.

And then the third illustration, the illustration of Noah is an illustration of a man and his family who were different from the entire community — from the whole population. It's as though he's saying it doesn't matter how small or how large the context in which you live, whether you're one of two, whether you're one of an entire family tree, whether you're the only family in the world that has a family of faith, I want you to see how it is that faith works in the life of the believer.

Sometimes we speak about faith as though it were a thing. Some kind of substance that you get when you become a Christian. And therefore, it's something you have or something that you don't have, as though it were measurable and containable. But this chapter in particular makes it clear that faith isn't a substance that God gives to us that we possess. And that kind of operates in the same way all of the time. Faith is the whole life that we live in response to the God that we have, and the promises that he makes.

Very interesting little section in our church's confession of faith, the Westminster Confession in chapter 14, which has the title of Saving Faith. And in the second section, in that chapter, the writers say, faith acts in different ways, in different circumstances. Faith responds with a different affection and emotion and action with respect to the word that God speaks and the situation in which God places us. So faith will look like different things, in different situations. And here and these three illustrations, he's teaching us that very valuable lesson. He is giving us what I've called three dimensions of faith in these three very different situations from which he draws his illustration.

The first dimension of faith that he describes in connection with Abel's sacrifice is faith seen as the worship of the heart. Faith expressed as our devotion to the Lord. Eve has these two sons. They're very different boys: one of them, likes agriculture, he's a farmer; and, the other likes animals, and hunting. He's a hunter. And both of them, as we're told in Genesis four, bring their sacrifices to the Lord. The Lord accepts the sacrifice of Abel. But he rejects the sacrifice of his brother Cain.

That's always been a question for students of the Bible. Why did God accept the one sacrifice and not the other sacrifice? Very popular answer to that question has been that Abel brought an animal sacrifice. Abel remembered how his parents needed a covering from the judgment of a holy God and how God had provided an animal skin for that covering. That Abel must have understood that in order to save our lives, there would need to be the sacrifice and offering of another life. Life for life, animal life for human life. And therefore, the difference between these two sacrifices was that Abel understood that and, and Cain didn't understand his need of salvation. Now, that may well be true, but it looks to me as though what the Bible is actually describing in Genesis chapter four, is not so much sacrifices as substitutes for sin, but sacrifices as expressions of gratitude to God and devotion to Him. And Genesis when it tells the story of these two boys sacrifices, does seem to make a very clear difference between

them. There wasn't so much that one brought produce and the other brought an animal. It is that we are told Abel brought the "first fruits". Abel brought the "first fruits", and Cain brought "an offering". The difference, then not so much in the substance of the sacrifice, as in the disposition of the one who was making the sacrifice. This brother, who is commended for his faith, is a brother, who demonstrated by His sacrifice that the Lord was first in his life. That the Lord would have the first fruits. That the Lord would have the best. Whereas his brother, Cain, simply brought an offering. It's almost as though Genesis is telling us he, he looked around to see if there was something left that he might give to the Lord.

And it's a great illustration of what real faith is. Real faith has this inbuilt characteristic that as it trusts in the Lord, the person of faith is devoted to the Lord, and develops an instinct of heart with respect to everything that he or she is, possesses and might do, that says, whatever happens, the Lord will be the first consideration. And that will be true in my calling and life, it will be true in the style in which I live, it will be true of my relationships within my family, it will be true of what I do with my finances, it will be true of the way I spend my time. The Lord will never have anything, but the very best that is possible for me to offer him. By comparison with the disposition that says, Oh, yes, and I suppose I ought to make some kind of sacrifice to the Lord.

Now, actually, when you begin to press that home, I think you'll begin to see why Cain ended up murdering his brother. I think he ended up murdering his brother, because he recognized that God was not going to accept His sacrifice. He ended up murdering his brother, because there was something about this gloriously free devotion to the Lord that angered him, because it showed him up for what he really was.

And so in this first little section, the author is teaching us about real faith, as very simply putting the Lord first and absolutely everything. Not just on Sunday, but on Monday through Saturday, and on Sunday through Saturday. And not just when we are fellowshiping together. But when we're out there in an ungodly world. And not just when we're doing religious things. But when we're doing our business. When we're treating clients if we're lawyers. Or patients if we're in the medical profession. Or pupils if we're teachers in school or in college or university. Or others if we're business people. And our neighbors in the street that the driving force of our lives is — Christ will be first in absolutely everything in my life.

I suppose it would be true, wouldn't it, if someone were to press me on that and to press you on that, that they might find areas of resistance? And if one pressed too much, just too much? If one said, Well, let's talk about your money. Let's talk about your time. Let's talk about your family. Is Jesus Christ really first? Then there would be a point at which we would perhaps not only say, thus far and no farther, but we would actually get angry. And we would disguise our anger by saying, You have no right to speak to me about these things. But you can't say that to the Lord, can you? And it would become clear that the anger is really directed against the Lord. Because we have resisted this call that he gives in faith, to give ourselves entirely and without reservation to him.

Now, if you have a kind of sinister mind, as some of us have, although we don't give it away, you'd say, yeah, but look what happened to him. Look what happened to him because he because he gave himself entirely to the Lord. His brother murdered him. That's what happens to you. Or at least that's what you endanger if you give yourself entirely to the Lord, people are not comfortable around people who have given themselves entirely to the Lord. But you notice what his last word about Abel is? His

faith is still speaking, hundreds, 1000s of years later, his faith is still speaking. Think about it this way. Two or three generations, if Christ doesn't return, what are your great grandchildren or great great grandchildren, going to be told about you? What will be the memory in your family circle of great great grandfather or great great grandmother or uncle, great uncle, whoever it was? Will the lingering story be, as it certainly was here with Abel, that his faith still speaks. So this is the glorious fruit of faith as the worship of the heart. And it's shown in Abel's sacrifice.

But there's a second dimension here. And it comes in one of the most mysterious men in the whole of the Bible. Drawn from Genesis chapter five. Faith, not now as the worship of the heart, but as a walk with God. Enoch, as we're told, in Genesis, chapter five, walked with God. Or in the language that's used here in Hebrews chapter 11. He pleased God. And now he's not just one man out of two brothers, he's one man out of an entire family tree. As you read through the early chapters of Genesis, you understand that what happens in the flood, and then in the covenant that God makes with Noah, is that God is bringing a world to an end, and he's starting a new world. And so Genesis chapter one and Genesis chapter five, are like bookends to part one of the book of Genesis. And they stand as it were, staring at one another. There's a refrain that runs through Genesis one and there's a refrain that runs through Genesis five. You've noticed the one in Genesis one. God spoke and things come into being, and God saw, and it was good, and God saw and it was good, and God saw and it was good and God saw and it was good and on and on it goes. But there is an antithetical refrain runs through Genesis chapter five, as the fruit of man's sin and the fall. And the refrain, in Genesis Chapter five is, "and he died, and he died and he died and he died and he died." And then all of a sudden we read about Enoch, and we are told, "and he was not" because God took him. You know, outside of the pages of the Bible, in Jewish literature, there is a mountain of material about Enoch, he was such a hero. But in the Bible itself, we're told only two things about Enoch. And they really mean one and the same thing. That God loved him and took him home without him seeing death, one of only two men in the Old Testament scriptures, you remember, of whom that was true. And God loved him, because he walked with God.

Now, what's the lesson here? There are many lessons here. But the lesson I want to press upon us this morning from Enoch is that this is actually the whole of the life of faith. It's simply a long walk in the presence of the Lord, with his word and promises in our hand. That's the kind of thing that we do with dear friends, isn't it? Or husbands and wives or parents and children, we, we go for walks, we spend time with each other, we open our hearts to one another. Because we're men and women, we do it in different ways. Women like to sit opposite one another and eyeball one another. And men like to walk sidesaddle or sit side saddle and not eyeball one another. Which ladies is the explanation for those moments when you say to your husband, you haven't been listening to me, and you are irritated when he quotes exactly what you have said to him back. It's because we are, we are different in the way that we conduct our friendships. But the thing that's common to us is the opening of our hearts, the sharing of our lives, the telling of our burdens, the explanation of our aspirations, and the discovery we make of what it means to have this kind of bond of friendship, heart to heart, life to life, mind to mind, affection to affection. And that's what was true of Enoch in his relationship to the Lord. It's surely one of the most beautiful things that could be said about anybody. I wonder if out in the churchyard there, there is a single stone that describes one of the believers who sat here, and now worship in glory. So and so walked with God. Wouldn't that be the most beautiful thing anybody could say about you? That they sensed when you were there, He was there. Because you walked with the Lord.

Now, what's the lesson for us? The lesson is, dear friends, being a Christian is not rocket science. You don't need to go to Theological Seminary and learn to read the Old Testament from right to left, in order

to walk with God. You don't need to have a higher degree in dogmatic theology to walk with God. It simply means taking his word in your hand and using it as your guide book and living in His presence. Isn't it what old Brother Lawrence so many hundreds of years ago called the *Practice of the Presence of God*. That's what pleases him. He's not so interested in the things that you're going to do for him. He wants you and he wants you to be in His presence. And that's what pleases Him most of all.

Those of you who have read brother Lawrence's *Practice of the Presence of God* may remember this statement that he makes. He says, "He knew religious people pretty well. Men invent means and methods of coming at God's love. They learn rules and set up devices to remind them of that love and it seems like a world of trouble to bring oneself into the consciousness of God's presence. Yet it might be so simple. Is it not quicker and easier just to do our common business, holy for the love of Him?"

Years ago, I remember a PhD student coming in for his oral comprehensive exam. He had written for two long days, answers to technical theological questions and he was brought in for the oral examination. There, half the faculty staring at him able to ask him anything they wanted, very intimidating! And he had done well in his written answers. But he seemed to fall apart when he was asked question. He didn't seem to be able to put things together. He struggled and sympathetic committee sent him away and said, we don't think that you're, you're really passable. We'll bring you back again. Go and do some more work. Same thing happened again. And I think again. They began to wonder whether he had written his written exam on a dishonest computer in which there was a little master theologian hidden on whom he had depended as he had written his answers. And eventually, in exasperation, he was asked, why is it that you've done so well in the written questions, and you've done so badly, you don't seem to be able to make connections to things? How did you prepare for the written exam? Do you know what he said? He said I memorized 93 dictionary articles. Ninety-three dictionary articles. He'd thought of all the possible areas where he might have been asked questions, and he'd memorized dictionary articles. And then he downloaded from his memory these pieces from the dictionary articles, but he didn't understand them. There is as a group of eminent theologians sitting in despair and exhaustion and saying to him, would it not have been easier just to learn the material? To understand what it was about, and not to crush your memory and your life with this burden, because you were frightened of not passing the exam? Now how many a man or a woman or a boy or a girl tries to live the Christian life that way? Adding up the things, doing the right thing. The burden of being a Christian. Oh, what a burden it is to be a Christian. And it's so miserably hard in this world. And people are so horrible about Christians in this world, and I'm trying my best I'm doing my bit. And I think if I can just do a little more, or be a little busier, or be a little more prominent in the church, than perhaps at last, at last, at last, it will all become good for me. Why don't you just learn to walk with the Lord in the light of His Word and to trust Him, and to seek to please Him? And as you read the scriptures to say, Lord, show me, show me how to live, give me the power to listen to and obey the Lord Jesus.

You know, you can't bring all that stuff into heaven, you know that, don't you? You need faith, trust. Trust that grows into love, walking with the Lord. Are you walking with the Lord? My friend, have you seen that is actually, that's what it's all about. It's about walking with the Lord. It's about knowing him. It's about living in His presence. Because he's far more interested in you and what he wants to make of you, then he is interested in all the stuff. And oh for some of us to discover that would be the greatest relief and release in all the world. And we can learn it here from Enoch who walked with God. And there's a wonderful encouragement, isn't there? Because those who come to God must believe that "He is and that He is the rewarder of those who seek Him." What's the reward?

Well, let me put it this way. What's that award when you sit down and you lose yourself in friendship of a friend or with your husband or wife? What's, what's the reward of all that? What's in it for you? Well, the other person is the reward, isn't it? Just being with them is all the reward you need? And so it is with the Lord Himself.

So we learn, don't we from Abel, that faith is the worship of the heart from Enoch, that faith is walking with God. And then from the great story of Noah, that faith means the word directing our lives. And here we come to one of the great stories, the building of the ark. I was saying to the children this morning, you know how big that ark was. It stretched in length from Marion Street to Bull Street. It was slightly broader than this church, and it was just about the height of the ceiling. It had three floors in it, and rooms. I don't know whether they were all the same size. You don't need the same size room for a lion as you need for a giraffe. The scriptures don't tell us how imaginative Noah was allowed to be in making these rooms. But it took ages to build. Ages and ages and ages. And during those ages, no doubt, because we are told about the deceitfulness and wickedness of the hearts of men and women and young people around Noah, no doubt whatsoever, building a boat, where there was no sea, made him mocked and despised by those who were round about him. But we're told why he did it. We're told he did it. In reverent fear, he constructed an ark for the saving of his house. What does that mean? It means that he preferred the smile of God upon his life to the smile of man upon his life. It means that he was delivered from the fear of man, because he'd learned this sweet and intimate fear of God. This disposition towards the Lord and His goodness. That means that if he frowns, my heart sinks, and if he smiles, my heart rises. Enoch pleased God because he feared God. And Noah stood against the whole world as it despised him. Because as we're told here, he allowed the Word of God to direct his life for years and years.

We all love Proverbs 3:5,6 don't we? "Trust in the Lord with all your heart. And don't lean on your own understanding in all your ways acknowledge Him, He will give you the desires of your heart", That's how Noah lived. And we shouldn't miss the fact that it was only the Mr. and Mrs. Noah and their children who lived that way. But because he feared God more than he feared man, because he desired the smile of God, more than the applause of man he was able to keep going. And as we are told here, by God's grace, his life condemned the world. And he became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith. He lost the applause of the world. But he lost the applause of the world because he knew that he was in a right relationship with God. And at the end of the day that was the only thing that mattered.

So this is Faith in three dimensions. There are times when it marvelously manifests itself in the worship of our hearts. Every day it manifests itself by the way we walk with the Lord in the light of His Word. And in our lives it comes to expression, because God's Word becomes our guide, and God's presence becomes our strength. And at the end of the day, if we are in a minority of one, we know that we are in a majority with God.

Oh do you have faith? Are you a pleasure to the Lord as you walk with Him? And do you fear him more than you fear man? Those would be some of the signs that we have the kind of faith about which Hebrews 11 is speaking. May God grant it to us. Let's pray together.

Our heavenly Father, we want to give our hearts to you in devotion so that in everything, all the complexities of our lives are reduced to having you first and foremost. We want to live in this world as

those who are conscious that we are walking with you, and that we are living in your presence. And we want whatever becomes us, to trust in you, and to have our lives shaped and molded by all that you have taught us in Your Holy Word. Oh, Lord, simplify us in our complexity. Draw us out that we may trust you and show us, we pray, the joy and the pleasure of living in your presence, of doing your will. And of walking day by day, hand in hand with our Savior Jesus Christ. We ask it in his name, amen.

**CLOSING PRAYER:**

Our heavenly Father, we want to give our hearts to you in devotion so that in everything, all the complexities of our lives are reduced to having you first and foremost. We want to live in this world as those who are conscious that we are walking with you, and that we are living in your presence. And we want whatever becomes us, to trust in you, and to have our lives shaped and molded by all that you have taught us in Your holy word. Oh, Lord, simplify us in our complexity. Draw us out that we may trust you and show us, we pray, the joy and the pleasure of living in your presence, of doing your will. And of walking day by day, hand in hand with our Savior Jesus Christ. We ask it in his name, amen.