

What Is Faith

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Text: Hebrews 11:1-3

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OPENING PRAYER:

Our gracious God and Heavenly Father, we thank you for the thrill of praising you. And the sense that you have destined us to be your loving children. Who rejoice in your presence. Who delight to tell you of our love for you. To hear you in song, and in scripture story, telling us of the marvels of your love for us. We pray that you would grow within us that love and filial affection for you, our heavenly Father. That you will exalt in our esteem, our Lord Jesus Christ. That you will fill us with your Holy Spirit that our hearts may beat in time with yours. And our voices may be attuned to the praises of angels and the ransomed Church of God that has saved now to sin no more. Thank you for this anti chamber of heaven where we have so often sensed your presence. Where great moments in our lives have been transacted. And we pray that in your goodness, you would come to us again and do your own work through your Word. We believe that it will not return empty to you. But will accomplish its own good purpose. We pray therefore that you would speak to us through your Word. That you would clarify our understanding. That you would cleanse and warm our affections. That you would enable us to yield our wills to everything that you will, and to rejoice in everything that you teach us. So we pray that this may not be merely the word of man, but for us the very Word of God. We look to you for that blessing, in Jesus our Savior's name, Amen.

Please be seated.

SCRIPTURE READING:

Now, as we continue to read and study in the Letter to the Hebrews, we've come this morning to the great 11th chapter. We're going to read verses one through three, and you'll find the passage is in the pew Bible, page 1007. And there should be a copy of that Bible if you need it, in front of you in the pew rack. For our children who have the Children's Bible, the passage is on page 1498. And the theme of the message this morning, as you will see, is what is faith. Hebrews chapter 11 and verse one, let us hear God's word.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

SERMON:

It's not difficult, I think, to imagine yourself in a Bible study group somewhere. Many of you are in neighborhood Bible, study groups, church, Bible, study groups, Community Bible study groups, circles in the women of the church, and all kinds of Bible study groups that meet in offices, and also in public places. Imagine that your leader in the course of reading some passage in Scripture asks quite casually the question, but what is faith? We read so much about it in the scriptures. But what is faith? And you can imagine round the circle, as always, there would be a variety of answers. Somebody might say, well, we confess our faith every Sunday morning, in our church. We stand up and we say, the Apostles Creed, and we confess that we believe in God, the Father, almighty, and so on and so forth. But then, of course, there is always somebody in the Bible study group who knows better than you do. And Mr. So and So or Mrs. So and So or Miss so and so says yes, that's That's all very well. But you will notice that the Creed uses the preposition in. It doesn't just say, we believe that God the Father Almighty created the heavens and the earth, but we believe in him. So faith means not just believing that things are true. Faith means that we trust in the one who says that these things are true. And Mr. So and So sits back with evident satisfaction. But then even Mr. So and so is trumped. Because there's somebody who has been studying at seminary or reading theological texts, he says, Well, he says, you know, what the Reformers taught was this, that will put you in your place, the reformed view of faith is that faith is knowledge and assent to that knowledge, and trust in the one who is at the center of that knowledge. And he sits back with evident satisfaction. Until somebody, perhaps they've been in the navigators. Or they've been in some Bible study group where they've learned Hebrews 11, off by heart, repeats the words of Hebrews 11:1. Well, those answers are all very fine. But what the scriptures say is that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen". And he sits back with even greater and more evident satisfaction, until somebody leans around the circle and says, What on earth does that mean? And why did the author of Hebrews speak about faith in this way instead of making it really simple and saying that faith is trust?

Of course, I think part of the answer to that question is that the author of the letter to the Hebrews is not, although it's often said that he is, he's not defining faith here. He's not saying now, let me let me stop everything I've been saying just before I go on. And of course, he's going to describe the great heroes of the faith in the Old Testament scriptures. And then he's going to come at the beginning of chapter 12, to Jesus as the author and the finisher of faith. He's not really stopping and saying, Oh, by the way, before we go on, take down this definition. No, you see he's been giving these Christians every conceivable encouragement to keep on going in the Christian life. And he sees some of the things that militate against that. Some of the things that would draw them back. And he's just been saying at the end of chapter 10, "We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls." And he's going to say, and I want you to know what a great and glorious family you belong to, if you are of those who have faith, and don't go back, even in the face of opposition. But you need to know what faith is like. So this isn't a scientific or a theological definition of faith that exhausts everything that could be said about faith. What he's saying is, this is how faith works. This is what we see in the heroes of the faith, as they exercise faith. And as you discover, as he will eventually say, that you're surrounded by a huge cloud of these, it's always very tempting to say a huge crowd of these witnesses. I want you to notice as I go through them, that there

are certain things that were characteristic of their experience. And if you are a believer, then these things are going to be characteristic of your faith, too.

And he does some very interesting things here. Doesn't he? Unusual, unexpected things. He gives us this description of faith in verse one. He gives us a hint in verse two, that he's going to go on to describe many people who experienced faith in this way. And then in verse three, he does something that I think is very unusual. He slips in a statement about creation. And we're gonna try and puzzle out what's going on in the mind of this author? What is the spirit enabling him to say to us by this description of faith; and, then this, I think, quite unexpected statement about the creation of the universe. And I think what he's doing is this. He is first of all, describing for us the specific character of faith, as it's experience. And then he wants to say something about the larger context for faith that will help us understand why faith works in this particular way.

So first of all, the specific character of faith in verse one. Faith, he says, is the "assurance", some translations, "the substance of things hoped for." It is the assurance, the substance of things, if I can put it this way, that are not yet. Well what does he mean? He means that faith holds on to the promises of God. Not all of which may be fully realized, either in our lives, or in history. That's one of the emphasis that we see again, and again, in these heroes of the faith. That they held on to the promises of God, although those promises were not yet realized in their lives. And as they did that, they came to sense with an assurance and a conviction that these things that were not yet fulfilled were, as far as they were concerned, as good as fulfilled, and they could absolutely rely on them. And that transformed their lives.

Try and give you an illustration of what I think he means. You are a young father or a young mother. Perhaps your wife says to you, Well, you go and check that the children are sleeping. Your little five year old and your little six year old, or three year old, or whatever. And you you go into the room of your little boy, and instead of being fast asleep in the land of Nod he's sitting up and he looks as though he is worrying about something. And you say, what is it? He says, all the other boys in the street have got bikes for their birthday this year. And I don't know if I've going to get a bike for my birthday this year. And loving father that you are, you say to him, you will get a bike for your birthday this year. And then you say to him, now go to sleep. You will get a bike for your birthday this year. Go to sleep. And you come back in two minutes later. zzzzz Why is he doing that? Because he knows that because his father has given the promise the bike is as good as his. And that's what this author is saying is how we experience the reality of faith. Faith is not some blind leap in the dark. Faith is a holding on to the promises of God in Scripture and knowing that they are as good as fulfilled for us, for one simple reason. That they are God's promises to us.

Actually a very important lesson for us to learn as you read through the stories of these heroes of the faith you noticed that what faith locked on to in their lives was never their own fancies. And sometimes we say about people, he's got great faith, when actually what we should say is he's got an amazing imagination. Faith is not the ability to imagine things. Faith is the resting of my soul on what God has promised to do. And that's why I can rely on these promises because he has promised to do them. That's actually why it's so important in our reading and studying of God's word that we stop and we chew the promises of God. That we get to know the promises of God that are applicable to every single situation in our lives. So that when we are in danger, or in trouble or discouraged, we have a promise to hold on to. We're not floundering around in the dark, or in the swamp, and saying, I don't know what to do or where to go. But we are clinging on to the promises of God. And knowing that because they are His promises, the reality is as good as ours because he has promised to fulfill every

single word that he has spoken. That's what Newton teaches us. Have you ever noticed this in *Amazing Grace*? "The Lord has promised good to me, His Word, my hope, secures." So this is why the Christian believer lives in such sweet confidence in the Lord, by faith. Because faith is the assurance, the substance, of the things that are hoped for, but are not yet.

And then he adds to that something that fills out the picture. Faith is also he says, the "conviction of things that are not seen." Now, clearly this is connected to the first statement. Things that are not yet, almost by definition, are things that are not seen. But it means something more than that in this situation. Because these believers have belonged to a community whose lifestyle has been very much dominated by the things that they could see. Dominated by the presence of the temple in Jerusalem as the visible place where God said he would meet with his people. And dominated by the visible presence of the priests, as they engage in their ministry and the visible presence of the high priest and the visible presence of the sacrifices. They could bring their sacrifices. They could touch their sacrifices. Lay their hands on their sacrifices, and transfer visibly their guilt to these animals, and the animal would be slain in their place. There was so much about those days of Old Testament religion, in which as Paul says, God treated them as we treat little children who are immature. And he gave them a kind of pop up picture book, so that they could see and touch the signs, the shadows of the reality of gospel grace. But he says, You need to know that deep down underneath that, faith in the days of the Old Testament, as well as the days of the New Testament, was always a deep seated conviction about the things that are not seen. You couldn't see the forgiveness of sins. You couldn't see the high priest when on the Day of Atonement he was in the holiest place of all. And so even then, in the midst of all these visible things you needed to live by faith, and not by sight.

And there's something even more significant as you read through these verses in Hebrews chapter 11. He actually keeps on emphasizing that these heroes of the faith live trusting God to do what they could not see with the natural eye. That Noah trusted God for things that were unseen. That's why people laughed at him. You silly old man, what are you doing building a boat in the middle of your garden? Where there's no sign of flooding. But he saw, you see, what God had promised and it was as yet invisible. And then the same is true of Abraham. God called them to a place he'd never seen. You know, perhaps Your husband says, let's go on vacation to wherever. And you say, I'm not sure about that place. I've never seen it. What's it like? Do we know anybody who's seen it? But Abraham sets out with just the naked promise of God to go to a place that he has not seen. Why? Because God's promise is absolutely reliable. More reliable than what we can see with our eyes. And the same thing with Joseph, he sees that there is going to be a land to which his people are going to go many years after his death. And part of his faith is that his bones should be taken there. Why? Because he trusted God's covenant word to his people. that it would be so. And perhaps the climactic statement that's made about Moses in verse 27 of this chapter that Moses endured as seeing him who is invisible. So listen to this. To us the visible is the real. The truth of the matter is, the things that are invisible to us are far more real, than the things that are visible. That's what Paul teaches, isn't it? He teaches us that that invisible world of God's dwelling place has a substantiality that makes this world look as though we're made of cardboard.

That's why we need to be converted, incidentally. And that's one of the hallmarks of being converted. That you start seeing the visible in the light of the invisible. When all your life you've been taught to think about the invisible in the light of the visible. Actually, we think about heaven that way, don't we? We think about these kind of souls without air in them, floating around in a kind of, you know, a some kind of never never land. It's a bit like Peter Pan. Why do we think that way? We think that way,

because we are convinced that this world in which we live is the really substantial world. But this world in which we live is a very temporary world. And he is teaching us to set our eyes on the reality of the promises of the invisible God. Promises about things that we cannot yet see. And to learn to live, my dear friends this is a basic fundamental principle of living the Christian life, that we live our lives not on the basis of what we can see with our eyes, but on the basis of what God says to us in His Word through our ears. That's why it's impossible for the Christian believer to think or to live the way people around him or her live. That's why it was impossible for these men and women of faith who are listed in Hebrews chapter 11 to look as though they belonged to the same world as these other people. Even though they were in that world, there was something radically different about them. Then it was simply this, that they had set their sight on what was invisible, the promises of God, the Word of God, the power of God. And because they had set their sights there, they were like those little children who can go sweetly to sleep knowing that a father has promised it. It will surely come to pass. And what he's saying here, do you see that at the end of chapter 10, he says, "We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls." We belong, he says, to a great company.

Actually, have you ever noticed incidentally, that our church hymn is based on Hebrews chapter 11? From Abel, and have you ever wondered why it is that I think of all the hymns we sing in this room that's the one that seems to get us stirred up most. I mean, even a Mighty Fortress is our God is great, but it's kind of second great compared with *Saints of Zion*. Why are we so stirred up? Because this is our family hymn. And it stirs us up to think that we are not alone in this. We're not alone in the battle. We're not the only ones who have struggled. We're not the only ones who have faced opposition, we belong to this great company of those who have faith. And he's saying, if that is the case, then your experience is going to be very similar to their experience. And you need to understand that what you will experience is this glorious reality of the promises of God being yours, even though they are not yet fulfilled. And the Word of God being given to you, even although it comes from the God who is himself invisible.

And it's that leads them on, I think, and we'll look at this briefly, to what I call the larger context for faith. And you'll see the connection. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for the conviction of things not seen." Why can we be so confident about this? Because by faith, we understand, notice that faith is not mindless. By faith, we understand that the universe was created by the word of God so that what is seen, was not made out of things that are visible. You see what he saying? He's saying, why would you think it's so strange that the invisible is more solid than the visible, when the solidity of the visible has actually been brought out of the invisible? And why would you doubt the Word of God, when by that word this cosmos was brought into being out of nothing. Out of no-thing?

I happen to look recently at the website for that great laboratory that there is in Geneva in Switzerland. The Sound Laboratory where they have been so excited with their great collider and the discovery, or the confirmation, that there is this Higgs Boson particle that some of them have called the God particle. And first thing that the website says is this. What is the universe made of? How did it start? Now my own conviction is, it is, more than legitimate that Christians who are scientists should be part of that investigation. God has given us a world to explore no reason why a Christian shouldn't be there as a scientist. But the fact of the matter is that we encounter scientists, whatever a scientist is, most of them are just human beings. And their thinking is as fallible as philosophers and professors of English literature, and 100 other things like lawyers, and doctors, and theologians and ministers, -- all the rest of it. We do meet scientists who believe because they're scientists, they are the ones who think clearly.

And I've encountered scientists, who, when you speak about God as creator, they do not just say, Do you have any scientific evidence for that? They are enraged. You see this in the scientific community, the desire of any possibility that anyone who believes in what they now a days call intelligent design should be given a position of respect in the scientific community that they want to dominate. And what they are hoping for, is at the end of all the scientific experiments and collisions and accelerations that are possible, they will get to the alpha point of all things, and from that point, be able to peer, as it were, behind that point, and say, We have seen the past right back to its alpha point. And as we saw the past right back to the alpha point and peered over the horizon, if I can speak that way, we could see absolutely nothing. They will be like Yuri Gagarin, up there in his Sputnik, or whatever these things were called rollicking around the earth and coming down in the days of the Cold War. "I've been in space. There is no God. I didn't see him up there." Now, what's the problem? The problem is that you say to the scientist just explained to me how something comes from nothing? Because all of your science has always taught you that if there is something it comes from something else. And the other thing I want to say to him is, tell me something new. My Bible told me this is what you would find. My Bible told me that when you got to the alpha point of the cosmos and peered over you would see absolutely nothing. That's what the Bible teaches, you would see absolutely nothing. You're not foolish enough to think that God is amenable to your scientific experimentation. And if there is a God, he would be like hanging on to the alpha point of the creation of the cosmos. We actually believe that the world was created out of nothing. Because there was someone behind the nothing of such immense intelligence, infinite kindness, and marvelous power, that he simply spoke His word. And out of nothing a cosmos came into being. Now what's the point of all that? Why is he getting into all this business about creation, because he wants to say to you, if God's word can do that, then God's promises can be trusted. If God's word can bring this cosmos into being without any prior material from which he would create it, if his word can do that, then you can be sure that every promise he has given in the pages of Scripture is utterly and absolutely reliable. The Lord has promised good to me, his word, my hope secures.

Now, why would this mean so much to these people? Because God had done something else. God had shown them that he would never fail to keep his promise. Because he had already kept, listen very carefully to this, they knew he had already kept the most difficult promise he had ever made. And they were able to reason if he's kept the most difficult and painful promise he has ever made, then not one of his promises will fall to the ground. What's the most difficult promise God ever made? Well, it was the promise to send his son and see his son beaten, and persecuted and spat upon, and then lifted to the cross of Calvary. To hear his Son on the cross crying out, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" If you're a father or a mother, wouldn't that be a difficult promise for you to make about your child? I promise the day will come when I will offer up my child in order to save someone else. And when my child cries out, why have you abandoned me, I will stand on the shore and say nothing in response. If you can keep that promise, you can keep every promise you make. And that's what they had discovered. That's what the early chapters had been about. The promise that God had made, that he would keep that promise, had now been kept.

And so my dear friends, if we've come to faith in Jesus Christ and understand the amazing magnanimity of the Heavenly Father in giving his son for us. And understand the logic of what Paul says in Romans eight, if He did not spare His own Son, then he will give us everything we need. Then we know that when He promises something to us, in His Word, it is as good as ours. And all we need to do is to wait humbly and modestly and to trust him. Because at the end of the day, there is nothing sweeter in all the world, when to trust in Jesus. So faith, he says, "is the assurance of things hoped for,

the conviction of things not seen." Do you have faith? You living the life of faith? Enjoying the life of faith? It begins when faith rests on Jesus Christ. And then everything else begins to fit together. Let's pray together.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for the power of your word and the reliability of your promises. We pray that they may be anchors for our souls, and that like little children we may rest in the assurance that everything you've promised to give to us and to do for us you surely will. And this we pray in Jesus our Saviors name, amen.