

The Epistle to the Hebrews

Lesson # 31 October 13, 2019 Faith Is....

Hebrews 11:1

Introduction to Hebrews 11

Hebrews 11 is one of the most beloved chapters in our Bible. Due to the scope of its content relative to the Old Testament, it is a challenging chapter to teach from – the challenge being – how much detail to leave out, and how much to share. Numerous OT characters, both by name and by inference are spread across the landscape of this chapter, and, as well, a great couple of verses early on (v. 1 & v. 6), help us define what faith, which is possibly the most important word in the Bible, really is. It is critical for us to know, those of us who have been told that to be considered just by God, we must *“live by faith.”*

Marcus Rainsford points out;

“Truly, faith in God’s Word is a divine and a mighty principle. It is the most acceptable obedience the heart of man can render. Faith is that principle which lays hold upon God through His Word; it is the work of the Spirit of God in the soul; it is omnipotent power, because it lays hold upon the strength of God Himself; and it overcomes the world; faith honors God, and therefore God honors faith. And here we are taught something more; namely, that it is the first practical evidence of our relationship to God: “they have kept thy word.”¹ His comment is on JN 17:6, which says, *“I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.”*

Leon Morris comments;

“We cannot understand the statements in the roll of honour in chapter 11 without seeing that faith here spoken of includes a wholehearted commitment to and a thoroughgoing reliance on God. It is impossible to exaggerate the extent of the personal commitment in Abraham’s faith when that patriarch ‘went out, not knowing whither he went’ (Heb. 11:8), or when he made himself ready to offer up Isaac (vv. 17ff). Or when Moses chose ‘rather to be evil entreated with the people of God, than to enjoy sin for a season’ (v. 25). Or of those who on account of faith were tortured, endured mockings and scourgings, were imprisoned, stoned, sawn in tow, and all the rest of it (vv. 35ff). If this does not mean personal commitment of the most wholehearted kind, words have no meaning. Here, as elsewhere, the writer is emphasizing that a wholehearted commitment to God is the basic religious attitude.”²

All of the book of Hebrews, and especially Hebrews 10, has been a precursor for us to be ready to understand why the Author of Hebrews has placed this extended

¹ Marcus Rainsford, *Our Lord Prays for His Own – Thoughts on John 17*, Kregel, 1985, p. 120-121

² Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament*, Eerdmans, 1965, 1999 pp. 305-306

illustrational example of how faith reveals its existence in the lives of God's people. Here is part of the 'great cloud of witnesses' described in [Heb. 12:1-3](#), which becomes one of the impetuses for our own exercise of faith, as we apply this amazing gift of God's Spirit in our lives – in our 'running of the race before us with endurance.'

It is difficult to imagine that any passage of Scripture carries more weight in describing what faith and faithfulness mean more than does Hebrews 11. Thomas Schreiner and Ardel Caneday help us see the connection between our faith and faithfulness in this excellent quote;

"Faithfulness is the proof of faith. Our pattern of behavior and the words we speak uncover what we truly believe. What we say, what we desire, what we do – all reveal what is in our hearts. God formed us so that there is an unbreakable and tight connection between faith and action, between creed and word, between belief and desire. Paul underscores this link: "Those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act in faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23 NRSV). Because we act out our beliefs, we disclose to those around us what our hearts secretly believe and cherish. Regrettably, it is true that we find ourselves too easily speaking or acting contrary to a belief we profess, confirming the fact that God's gift of faith is not yet perfected in us. God's grace gives birth to our faith, and this faith governs the pattern of our behavior, so that by faith God purifies our hearts into holiness (Acts 15:9; 26:18). Therefore, when Hebrews 11 recites the registry of those whom God commends, what the author mentions in every case is the behavior and conduct for which God commends them. God commends them for their faith, which shows itself in their faithful words and conduct (cf. Heb. 11:9). All behavior is conceived in the womb of our beliefs. Therefore, all our desires, all our words and all our deeds make known what we truly believe and what we truly value in our hearts."³

It is a common error, I believe, to consider faith a limited treasure – one that merely sets us on the path to eternal life – i.e., is associated only with our conversion and therefore our justification. In a practical sense, we recognise verses like Hebrews 10:38 – "*my righteous one shall live by faith...*", and II Corinthians 5:7 – "*we walk by faith, not by sight...*", and realise that our faith, once engaged, cannot be separated from the way we live our lives. It is a guiding principle of our worldview. For one thing, the Bible constantly reminds us of the critical nature of faith, and of course, faith's object, Jesus Christ. Passages like Hebrews 11 tend to ground us in the reality of the importance of faith in our daily walk, as well as showing us what the cost of faith was for numerous OT characters, and especially their willingness to (in many cases) to die for what they believed. Even if faith did not result in their immediate deaths, in virtually every other case recorded, it did result in life-altering changes for them.

³ Thomas Schreiner & Ardel Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us*, IVP Academic, 2001, P. p6

Of course, Hebrews 11, as extensive a list as it is, is not fully comprehensive. There are many believers from the OT who are not on the list by name, or are relegated to being summarized in the catch-all of Hebrews 11:32-38.

It is interesting that prior to Hebrews 11, the word “faith” occurs only five times – [4:2, 6:1, 6:12, 10:22, and 10:38], and “faithfulness” occurs only five times as well – [2:17, 3:2 (twice), 3:5 and 10:23]. In Hebrews 11, the phrase, “by faith” occurs 18 times. In a book like Hebrews, in which faith plays such a prominent role, it seems a bit odd, that apart from chapter 11, it comes up so few times. Yet, the concept of the critical nature of faith is never far from the surface of the entire book as the fight against apostasy is so evident throughout. And the temptation to commit apostasy must be fought against by a perseverance which is really an extended application of faith. Based on many Scriptural texts – and a number of these are in Hebrews – that tell us that striving and/or perseverance are specific and critical requirements for faithful believers to exercise in order to enter heaven! It is an extensive list of verses – but here are some: Heb. 3:6,14; 6:11; 10:23,26; 12:14; Rev. 2:7, 10; Rom. 2:7; 2 Pet. 1:10; 2 Tim 2:12; James 1:4,12; Acts 14:22; Phil. 2:12; JN 8:31; Gal. 6:9; Matt. 24:13 and so on.

In Hebrews 11, the Holy Spirit surprises us in some cases by injecting never before known information about OT passages, which were never shared in those passages. For example, Heb. 11:19, which gives us Abraham’s thought process as he faithfully obeyed God in proceeding to offer up Isaac in Genesis 22; or Hebrews 11:37 – “they were sawn in two...”, which is never mentioned in the OT, but history tells us that this was the way that the prophet, Isaiah was martyred by King Manasseh; and Moses’ thought process in Hebrews 11:26. One last one – Heb. 11:4 tells us of Abel presented a pleasing offering to God “through his faith”, yet Genesis 4:4 never says it was “faith”, but that is certainly implied.

As we move into our study of this generously gracious chapter, intended to encourage us and to bolster our own faith and perseverance [i.e., they did it – so can you], we must enter thankfully and reverently, not revering the people named here or their faithful deeds, but revering the God who carried them along and gave them their great faith to exercise and to sustain them. The AH has provided the church great examples to imitate. Here is Mark Jones, citing Charles Spurgeon’s comment on how God sustains us every moment of our Christian lives;

“When we put our foot on the threshold of glory, and pass through the gate of pearl to the golden pavement of the heavenly city, the last step will be as much taken through the grace of God, as was the first step when we turned unto our great Father in our rags and misery. Left by the grace of God for a single moment, we would perish. We are dependent as much upon grace for spiritual life as we are upon the air we breathe for this natural life.”⁴

We have faith that God is with us every step of the way.

⁴ Cited in Mark Jones, *God Is*, Crossway, 2017, p. 182

What Faith Is and Does

Hebrews 11:1,6

As with virtually all biblical concepts, to proceed to study them, we must come to some consensus as to what the definition of the key word is or words are. In this case, quite obviously, the key word for chapter 11 is “faith”. In our lengthy introduction, especially through the quotes cited, we have come a long toward that understanding of the definition of faith. Yet, in light of the critical importance of this topic and the stark implications of verses 1 & 6, we must apply further thought to what faith is and is not. Never mind the fact that an outgrowth of modern ‘evangelical’ sects abuses the notion of faith by saying its main function is to help us acquire “things” of value in the here and now, thus hijacking the Bible’s intention for faith. For our study, that which is much more important, is to answer the question, “Is it possible to have a worthless or deficient faith and if so, how would we identify it?”

Hebrews 11:1a - Assurance

“*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for,...*”. This is how the ESV translates the Greek word, ‘*hupostasis*’. The same word is found in Heb. 1:3 – “the exact imprint of his nature.”, and in Heb. 3:14 – “if indeed we hold our original confidence to the end.” Accordingly, the word can mean “nature”, “confidence”, “essence”, or “substance”, or “assurance”, as the ESV translates. I do prefer the ESV translation here.

But “*faith is the assurance*” of what? The text says “*of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” First of all, as those who have faith, what do we hope for? Well, as students of the Bible, as theologians, we could compile a lengthy list of what the believer’s hope consists of. I recognise that some may have hopes for things not listed in Scripture, and of course, the improperly named “Word of Faith” movement I alluded to earlier, uses some of those hopes, which are not godly hopes, to entice people to ‘follow them’, but it seems, especially, to get people to send them boatloads of money. But not all hopes conceived outside of Scripture are tied to ungodly themes just because they are not specifically named in Scripture. Such as, hoping for happiness for our children, hoping for an ‘easy’ death, hoping for honourable employment, etc. Biblical hopes can be found in our Bibles, here are some of the prominent ones;

- We long to hear these words from our Saviour – “Well done good and faithful servant...Enter into the joy of your master.” MT 25:23
- We hope to see Him appearing as He comes again – 2 Tim. 4:8 – and to receive the crown of Righteousness – cf. also Rev. 2:10
- Romans 5:2 – we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God; and cf. Romans 8:24-25 – we hope for (with patience & eagerness) our “*adoption as sons*”, and the ‘redemption of our bodies. In 8:19 – “*the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.*”
- Luke 23:42-43 & Rev. 2:7 – we hope to be in paradise with Jesus.
- Revelation 21:1-4 – no more tears, no more death, to dwell always with God, no more mourning, no more sin, and cf. 21:25 – no more night.
- “*To know God*”, which according to Jesus in JN 17:3, “*is eternal life*”.

- Revelation 2 & 3 - within the letters to the 7 churches, Jesus Himself makes promises to the faithful – to those who have ‘ears to hear’ Him and who strive to please Him – note: 2:7, 10-11, 17-26; 3:5,12 & 21.
- Our promised inheritance – Col. 1:12-14; 3:23-24; of being priests – Ezekiel 44:28. God is our inheritance.
- The punishment of the wicked – cf. Rev. 6:9-11; 20:15; of the Antichrist and False Prophet – Rev. 19:20, and Satan 20:10.

Certainly, we could add numerous things to this list, but the point of the first part of Heb. 11:1 is that *“faith is the substance or assurance of things hoped for.”*

John Piper is convinced that what this conveys is that, “Faith tastes that future joy now. Faith is the beginning of that satisfaction in God now. Some degree of that future experience of seeing and savoring God’s beauty in Christ is called faith. It is only a taste by comparison to what it will be. Since faith sees the glory of God now only as “in a mirror dimly” (1 Cor. 13:12, cf. 2 Cor. 5:7), our present experience of the substance and essence of future joy with God is embattled and varying. Faith can be weak or growing or strong (LK 17:5; Acts 16:5; 1 Thess. 3:10; 2 Thess. 1:3). But the essence of faith is that it tastes the all-satisfying glory of what God is for us in Christ. Thus, it participates in the ‘substance’ or ‘nature’ of what is hoped for.”⁵

Richard Phillips here quotes John Calvin;

“The Spirit of God shows us hidden things, the knowledge of which cannot reach our senses...We are told of the resurrection of the blessed, but meantime we are involved in corruption; we are declared to be just, and sin dwells within us; we hear that we are blessed, but meantime we are overwhelmed by untold miseries; we are promised an abundance of good things, but we are often hungry and thirsty; God proclaims that He will come to us immediately, but seems to be deaf to our cries. What would happen to us if we did not rely on our hope, and if our minds did not emerge above the world out of the midst of darkness through the shining Word of God and by His Spirit? Faith is therefore rightly called the substance of things which are still objects of hope and the evidence of things not seen.”⁶

Hebrews 11:1b – Conviction

HCG Moule gives us his idea about Hebrews 11:1;

“Moule objects to the idea that Hebrews 11:1 gives a definition of faith. He prefers to think of it as a statement about faith. The words of this verse are the sort of statement we make when we say, ‘knowledge is power’. That is not a definition of knowledge, by any means. It is a description of it in one of its affects. He sees Heb. 11 in this light, ‘Noah, Joseph, Moses – they all treated the hoped for and unseen as solid and certain because they all relied on the faithful Promiser. Their victories were mysteriously great, their lives were related vitally to the Unseen. But the action to

⁵ John Piper, Expository Exultation, Crossway, 2018, p. 262

⁶ John Calvin, as cited by Richard Phillips, Hebrews, p. 394-395.

this end was on their part sublimely simple. It was reliance on the Promiser. It was taking God at His Word.”⁷

The second part of verse 1 tells us that “[*Faith is*] *the conviction of things not seen.*” Verse 1 explains the nature of faith, not by completely defining faith, but by explaining how faith works. IOW – what is the benefit of having faith? This second part of the verse is saying that by faith we are convinced that what God has promised will most certainly be fulfilled. The ‘things not see’ are not only future things, but include the act of creation, God’s existence, His faithfulness and power – for example. Unseen, and yet, by faith, we ‘see’ these things. In fact, Romans 1:19-20 tells us: “*For what can be known about God is plain to them [to men], because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.*” So, Paul’s point is that these invisible things are so certain that we are left without excuse if we “*suppress the truth*” of them in unrighteousness. So Paul’s point is that we must see them by faith.

In Psalm 16:1-11 (especially v. 11), we see David’s conviction of “*things not seen*”, as he writes from an OT perspective, not even being privy to the NT truths and promises we have been blessed by God’s grace to see. In v. 11, David is trusting in what he believes (faith) has been shown to him in God’s Word and through his own experiences of a life of faith.

What we are most familiar with in our own lives, and are prone to count on is what we can see with our own eyes. We must admit this spiritual flaw. FF Bruce comments, “Physical eyesight produces conviction or evidence of visible things; faith is the organ which enables people (like Moses in Heb.11:27) to see the invisible order.”⁸

Paul reminds us, or better, exhorts us to understand...in I Cor.2:14-16. Verse 14 of that brief passage says, “*For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.*”

Natural man (i.e., the unsaved) prefers a life of trusting his senses, and to believe only what can be scientifically or empirically ‘proven’. Unbeliever’s lives are full of objections (some utterly baseless) against spiritual truth. But when a heart is changed by the Holy Spirit, that operating power of unbelief is broken and faith then argues “God has said it, so it must be true.” “Faith convinces the understanding that is compelled, by force of arguments unanswerable, to believe the certainty of all that God has spoken.”⁹ Faith is a supernatural power to overcome Satan’s attempts to

⁷ HCG Moule, footnote # 77 in Leon Morris – The Cross in the New Testament, p. 305-306

⁸ F.F. Bruce, Hebrews, p. 277

⁹ A.W. Pink, The Heroes of Faith. Mt. Zion Publishing. ND, p. 9

deceive us and the world's drawing power to drag us away from God. Ephesians 6:10-18 reminds us that our fight for faith is not against (just) what we can see, but what is physically invisible to us. Here, in v. 16, faith is called a defensive weapon – “a shield” – which extinguishes those attempts by the evil one to dissuade us from our faith in God.

Here, the words of D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones are helpful:

“The lesson of faith is a lesson that must constantly be practiced and rehearsed. Lloyd-Jones expresses this even more strongly.

“The main art of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself. You have to take yourself in hand. You have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself. The essence of this matter is to understand that this self of ours, this other man within us, has got to be handled. Do not listen to him; speak to him; condemn him; unbraid him; exhort him; encourage him; remind him of what you know instead of placidly listening to him and allowing him to drag you down and depress you.”¹⁰

And Tom Schreiner adds from a positive perspective;

“Faith is the means by which one lays hold of Christ, who is our righteousness. Faith alone justifies “because faith brings us the Spirit gained by the merits of Christ.” Faith saves because it “takes hold of Christ and believes that my sin and death are damned and abolished in the sin and death of Christ.” Faith saves, then, because it unites believers to Christ. Faith looks away from oneself and trusts in what Christ has done.”¹¹

The word ‘conviction’ is defined as “the action or resulting state of being convinced”, or “a firm belief or opinion.”¹² By inserting the 2nd part of v. 1, the author is encouraging us to consider the critical importance of not just having or professing faith, but to see it as a necessary component of being a Christian. If we are in a state of being convinced that what we hope for, although unseen by our senses, is true, then that needs to be the basis for our subsequent actions. Notice again the last 2 verses of Heb. 10.

Faith, according to Hebrews 11:1 and the whole chapter, is a lot more than just trust in another's Word. It is way more than just mental assent. Andrew Murray comments; “Faith is much more than trust in the word of another. That trust is of extreme importance as its initial exercise, but the word must only be the servant leading in to the divine truth it contains, the living person from whom it comes. To deal too exclusively with the word as the ground of faith that is more intellectual than spiritual, a faith that, as the church so universally shows, rests more in the wisdom of men, in the power of reason, than in the power of God. We need to be persuaded very deeply that faith is not only dealing with certain promises but an unceasing spiritual communion with the unseen world around us...faith is the unceasing reaching out

¹⁰ D.M. Lloyd-Jones, cited by Os Guinness, *God in the Dark – The Assurance of Faith Beyond a Doubt*, Crossway, 1996, p. 142

¹¹ Tom Schreiner, *Faith Alone*, Zondervan, 2015, p. 45

¹² Source – The Concise Oxford Dictionary.

heavenward of that spiritual sense to which things future and unseen reveal themselves as present, as living and powerful. Faith must in the spiritual life be as natural, as unceasing as our breathing and seeing when we are doing our ordinary work."¹³ (emphasis is mine)

I used this quote especially because of the way Andrew Murray connects faith with "ordinary work" – IOW -our everyday lives. It is to be a real component of our lives, not just something we activate for show on Sundays and Wednesdays. Tom Schreiner adds to this thought – "Faith is shown as genuine when it is brought to completion by our actions."¹⁴

I wanted at this point to examine a question that strikes me as critical to deal with before we move any further into the chapter.

What is the Source of Faith?

As we move more and more into the meat of chapter 11, there is a danger of thinking this way; "I can't possibly emulate these people! They must have had an enormous amount of faith to accomplish what they are being commended for! They were fearless...not perfect...but they put their lives on the line, put their future hopes on the line, and well, just did what they had to do. I can't do that." But that sort of thinking is based on thinking that we are the source of our faith, and the ones who guide or make use of its power.

This thinking is biblically refuted. This is obviously a huge topic, and it is thus quite a chore to whittle it down to one lesson. However, here is an attempt to make some sense of it.

I decided to look at some classic passages rather than do a study of the entire Reformation, where "by faith alone" and "in Christ alone" was really brought to the forefront of Christian thought. We will just read some of these passages together and then the answer to our question should be quite evident, and then we'll summarize.

Acts 3:16; Romans 3:21-31 (grace as a gift); 4:3,16-17; 5:1-2,8; 6:18-22 ('been set free');8:14 (you have received the Spirit of adoption); 10:4-17; 12:3; Ephesians 2:4-9; Titus 3:5; I Tim. 1:14; I Peter 1:3-7,9; 2 Peter 1:1; Gal. 3:5-6,18-24; Phil.1:29; Col. 1:3-4; James 2:14f; John 1:9-13; 3:3,6-8; 6:35-37,44,64-65; 10:24-30; 17:2,6,9,11,12,22,24.

And we could literally call on dozens of more verses, but apart from the brief comments made on each passage, it is easy to observe and point out that both grace and faith are gifts – we don't earn them, we don't draw from some spark of 'prevenient' faith within us and then fan it into a flame which grows to a blazing inferno inside us! Faith is a gift just as grace is a gift of God. Ephesians 2:1 (cf. Col. 2:13) tells us that we are dead in sin, and then Ephesians 2:4-9 provides the remedy

¹³ Andrew Murray, *The Holiest of All*, Whitaker House, 2004, pp. 436-437

¹⁴ Schreiner, *Faith Alone*, p. 193

we could not eke out (cf. Rom. 3:11), find or grasp on our own because being dead more than implies spiritual inability. That's the reason for Jesus exhortation to Nicodemus in John 3:3,7 "*You must be born again.*" This is a striking reminder that God saves us, we do not save ourselves! Jesus died to save His people, His sheep, His church, His elect, from our sins – He did not die to make us saveable! He died to save us.

So, as we venture further into Hebrews 11 and observe the amazing feats, thoughts, actions and hopes of the OT saints, let us not praise and worship these people as having achieved a marvellous faith by their own doing, but let's stand in awe and wonder to see how God can use such unpromising material to achieve great and wondrous results!